

ENTANGLEMENT

on anarchism & individualism



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Introduction

What you hold in your hands is an experiment in collective analysis and writing. It is also a critical engagement with the place individualism does hold and/or should hold in anarchism.

Initially, one person asked some friends to come together and co-create a collection of texts *against individualism*. Whether the project is actually against individualism is still up for debate. We've done a lot of playing with language and some of us prefer "*on individualism*," "*for collectivism*," "*on interdependence*," or "*critically engaging with individualism*." In reality, it is all of those things and also other things too—defences of duty and futurity, critiques of some of old philosophers, calls to reconsider oppression and social position, some explorations of the interdependence of all forms of life, and thoughts on our wider interstellar context. We think individualism and its place in anarchist thought is still a common thread that runs through all of these texts, but the project certainly isn't the single-minded refutation that "*against individualism*" might imply.

We have been having the conversations that lead to the pieces in this collection, in various forms and configurations, for a long time. We talked about our changing relationships to insurrectionary anarchism. We talked about how certain critiques of activism or of anarchist organizations, critiques that in most cases we shared to some extent, seem to have been taken on as principles in themselves. We talked about desire, about informality, about strategy, and about revolution. We talked about negativity, whether we're actually *against everything* (we're not), and whether we still want to orient ourselves towards the future (we do). We talked about whether anarchism can be *about*

trying to change things (it has to be). We hope the writings in this project will help us to keep having these conversations with a wider circle of people.

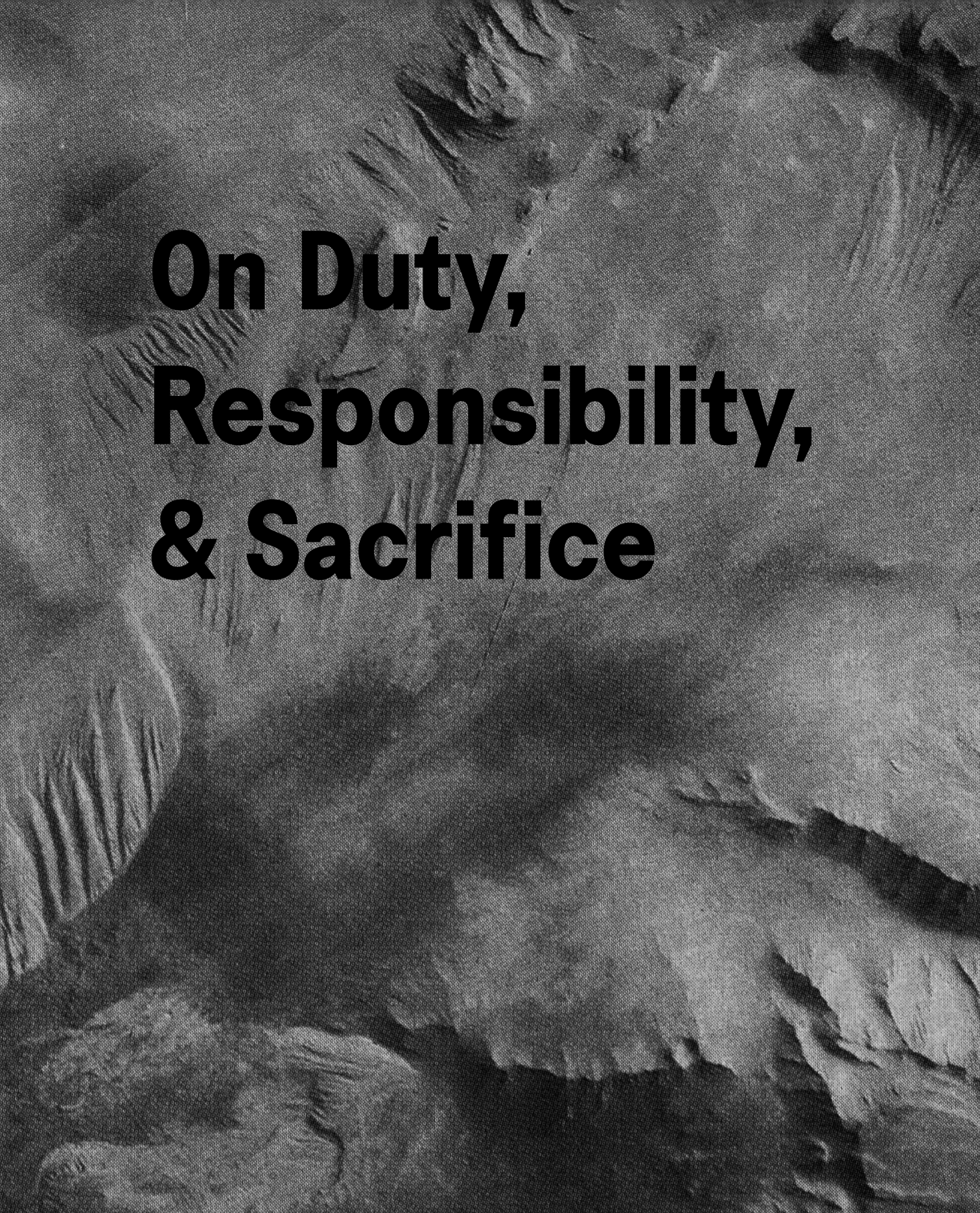
This project was born of a desire for clarity and for rigorous political conversation. We share a desire to sharpen our analyses, and to communicate our positions clearly to the people around us so that we can know where affinities lie. We are not all the same as each other, something that's become even clearer through the process of writing together about our politics, but we do share a number of commitments and orientations, and that's good to know. Talking about it will help us understand who we can count on for what, and who we should look to when we have ideas about how to move forward. It will also help us understand the size and nature of the revolutionary force we are building.

The writing here is the product of a lot of debate, compromise, and editing but it is not the product of co-authorship. "Deal-breaker" ideas have for the most part been rephrased or removed, but there is still a lot of difference contained in this volume, and we are ok with that. We each agree to stand by the volume as a whole but we are not each equally committed to all of the writing it contains. Each essay represents an individual's analysis, sharpened and improved by input, suggestion, agreement and disagreement with four other people as well as some generous outside readers.

Who are we? We are a group of five white anarchists who have known each other for years. We are relatively young and have been anarchists for an average of ten years. We have all spent some time in and have some connection to Montreal (occupied Tiohtià:ke), although we don't all live there now. This group is temporary. It is not a collective that existed before or

will continue to exist as a project in the future, but we are all friends and recognize that this project is to a large extent the product of social ties and of shared experience in and out of the anarchist milieu. Every single one of us has seriously considered quitting this project at some point during the process because writing is hard, because affinity is never perfect, because critique can hurt, and because time is scarce and action often comes first. But we didn't, and here it is. ♦



A black and white photograph of a rugged, rocky landscape. The scene features steep, craggy cliffs and a winding path that leads up a hillside. The lighting creates strong shadows, emphasizing the textures of the rock and the contours of the terrain. The overall mood is one of challenge and perseverance.

On Duty, Responsibility, & Sacrifice

On Duty, Responsibility, & Sacrifice

I believe firmly that we (anarchists) and We (the world) would be better off if more of us asked ourselves, regularly and earnestly, “what needs to be done right now?” and did that. This notion has always been at the core of my anarchist practice and informs my day-to-day decision-making. At one point I would have said that it was, in fact, a pillar of what constitutes an anarchist life.

But it's not so cool to say that anymore. We're encouraged by forces internal and external to guide ourselves by other questions. What do I want to do right now? What is in my heart? What am I moved to do? I have friends and comrades who use words like “duty,” “responsibility” and “sacrifice” now only in the pejorative. I think this is a position to challenge. Here is my attempt to begin that conversation, to rehabilitate and defend those terms.

I think a lot of this comes down to character, temperament and personal motivation and I don't mean to start a quarrel with those who could otherwise be my accomplices. I see this only as an exploration, a calling out of a way of thinking and behaving that *effectively excludes and dissuades* people and groups from participating in social struggle if and when they participate primarily because they think they *should* do so. I hope it will also be read as an invitation for those whose motivations and goals are closer to my own to get in touch, to build something together, to help ourselves and one another deepen and improve our revolutionary practice.

I raised myself to emphasize sacrifice way too much. A natural do-gooder, I spent a lot of my youth throwing myself into causes, feeling guilty about every privilege I had been born into, attending endless meetings, staying up late worrying about

hungry people far away. Anarchism, and especially insurrectionary anarchism, gave me a way out of this worldview, a self-loathing, exhausting and unsustainable kind of activism that I now know was a trap. I learned only in my twenties that my revolution should be for myself as well as for others, that I had to find a way to see my interests as aligned with those I struggle with, that my own lack of freedom was an injustice in itself (one deeply tied to the unfreedom of everybody else), and that participation in struggle could feel good, joyful, euphoric, sometimes even happy, not like a job or a chore. The invitation for individuals to act in the here and now, to experiment with methods for creating conflict with power rather than waiting for revolutionary conditions to arrive at our feet, to live lives of revolt rather than waiting for the correct historical moment to strike, is a large part of what differentiates anarchists from other revolutionaries. It is what drew me here and it is a big piece of what will keep me here for years to come.

But some of us burn with an energy that goads us towards something else, something different. In our burning we suffer anguish from every humiliation that the present world imposes on us. We cannot resign, accept our place and content ourselves with just getting by. Moved to decisive action by our passion, against all the odds we come to view life differently—or more precisely, to live differently.

— Wolfi Landstreicher,
Against the Logic of Submission

The anarchist emphasis on the agency of the individual is a revolutionary, liberatory and important line of thought. It is a necessary corrective to both the historical determinism of other revolutionaries and the nay-saying of reformist activists and politicians. It can be a call to arms, demanding we lay aside excuses and build the courage to try out revolutionary actions in the here-and-now, no matter what conditions we find ourselves born into. But it becomes dangerous and detrimental when we treat it as a descriptive rather than prescriptive position, allow it to be about “I” and not “we.” There is a huge difference between the idea that we should work to build our *individual and collective* power to act in the here-and-now, and the idea that some of us already possess it and the decision to use it or not is a matter of informed and equal choice. The first one sets up an ethical imperative, or at least a revolutionary challenge, to make ourselves into the kinds of people who will find ways to act even in the face of apparent futility, to build our own power to resist and to help our comrades and potential comrades do the same. The second one makes it a matter of mere personality or choice, drawing a line between those who already possess some innate rebellious spirit and those who do not (or who perhaps do but refuse to use it, preferring instead to live comfortable lives).

I know anarchists who feel themselves naturally inclined towards a life of disobedience and perhaps even revolt. I have many friends who recount a life extending far back into childhood of questioning or even despising authority, a seamless transition from heated words and rocks thrown at overbearing fathers, abusive social workers and authoritarian school principals to those same projectiles directed

at police, politicians, and white supremacists in their adult lives. But I know just as many for whom the cop inside the head was quite strong until they were convinced to try and kill it, who preferred to run and hide from schoolyard bullies rather than stand and fight, who felt no natural inclination towards rebellion before they stumbled upon it, either by persuasion or demonstration. I know people who faced terrible circumstances and endured them quietly, and people who lived privileged and comfortable lives and still couldn’t stomach obedience. This difference may be a matter of character and luck as well as circumstance, and I therefore refuse to elevate the “naturally” rebellious over those who need to claw their way out of obedience through perseverance and self-work. In fact, having known a fair number of both kinds of people, I have no preference as to which constitute my own close comrades—the self-workers often tend towards self-righteousness and rigidity, but the rebels can be unkind, selfish assholes. What matters to me is that we are here now, and that we remain open to others who might one day join us in struggle.

What matters most is that we cultivate within ourselves and each other the capacity to fight. All who see the horror of this world share responsibility; it may weigh heavier on some than others but for all of us it remains just that—a responsibility, a duty, an imperative. Finding joy in doing what we can and must do is one way, perhaps the best way, of finding and maintaining our capacity to act. This becomes especially important when there are few victories in sight, when we feel we are doomed, or when we act from a place of righteous negativity or pessimism rather than from hope or belief in imminent

revolutionary change. But if we make joy alone the end goal, we risk losing track of our reasons for coming to social struggle in the first place and risk abandoning a lot of potential comrades.

Some Opinions:

Just because my revolution is for me does not mean it's not for others, some of whom I have never met.

Just because it can feel joyful to participate doesn't mean I don't have a deep responsibility to others and to the earth to keep going even when it does not.

I know myself but I don't know enough to do this alone, so I have a duty to listen and to collaborate.

Does that sound horribly old school? Have I lost you already, friends? I hope not, because I need to stay here with you. I need it for my own well-being, sanity and sense of dignity, and we need it for the revolution. I'm afraid I'm losing comrades in two directions, and that neither direction is listening to the other anymore. Although I see these two problems as overlapping and perhaps even the same problem, if I had to define them I would draw those who I have lost into roughly two categories:

Those who believe that the struggle is looking after yourself and creating a world where you and yours can feel safe.

and

Those who believe that the struggle is about chasing the indescribable emotional state of a moment of rupture, a sensory experience of realizing your own power in a clash with authority.

I'll address you separately because I know you don't all like each other right now and I don't expect you'll see yourselves in each other very easily, but I hope you'll both see how this is one conversation, one problem, one situation. I hope you'll at least come to understand where I sit with this. I hope that others who, like me, want to resist both of these pulls away from collectivity will find paths to each other and build relationships of affinity. In doing this, I'll also end up laying out some of my own ethical framework, my own set of responsibilities, not because I think that they are precisely what yours should be, but as an experiment in clarity. I think that while your duties to the world and to those around you might be framed differently from mine, we should all be able to do this, should all be able to name what responsibilities we do and don't feel compelled to live up to, should all be able to explain why it is that we struggle in the way that we do.

You see, in both of these situations it's all about *you* and not at all about *us*, *humanity*, *the world* or *the planet*. And that hurts, because I'd still die for your freedom if I thought it would genuinely make you free. And I want us to work together, not as one movement or organization but in concert as something more chaotic and powerful than that, to become a serious threat to the forces that I know we all still hate.

Self-care is a necessary + revolutionary act. Take time for you!

— **Sticker on the wall of a university bathroom, shamelessly misquoting Audre Lorde.**

In a world where some people's comfort and well-being seem to come so much easier than others', and where almost everyone struggles to live the life they want, providing for and comforting those who are cast aside and preyed upon by the state and capitalism could be an important tool in a battle to change the world. Perhaps if we could create resilient, self-sufficient lives and communities whose basic needs were met, those individuals and communities would have an easier time building the power to overthrow the systems that keep them down in the first place. For many, maybe even most, of us, that means caring for ourselves as well as others, because to widely varying degrees we are the ones being used as fuel and labour to maintain a system that does not serve us.

Self-care, however, is not synonymous with revolutionary struggle. Equating doing what we must do to simply stay alive with the hard work of fighting the roots of oppression will doubtless lead us to a world where those in power don't experience us as much of a meaningful threat. Sure, in many cases they don't want us to survive at all, but that's because they are afraid of what we might do to them. That's why throughout history and around the world, the powerful function with both carrots and sticks, sometimes beating us into submission and other times throwing us bones to create the illusion that we're provided for. Those in power are smart

enough to know that while comfort and stability can sometimes be a necessary foundation for fighting back, they can also sometimes serve to keep us controlled. We must be careful not to pacify and control ourselves, and to keep in mind that as anarchists our struggle is for more than simply being alive. The struggle for an end to the fundamental power relations that make this world what it is is different from the struggle to feed and shelter our communities. It is also different from, although connected to, a fight to feed and shelter the whole world. Because of that, care on its own is not enough and our success cannot be measured by whether we are alive, whether others are alive, or even by whether we are "happy."

Self-care and care for each other are responsibilities that we share. Without living up to these responsibilities many of us will not be able to participate in the impossibly difficult struggles that will be necessary to bring down the forces that are currently in control. We need to sustain ourselves and each other, and we need to help ourselves and each other find joy whenever possible in our struggles, *so that that battle can continue*. If we aren't fighting anymore, no matter how good we feel, then all is lost. This brings me to my first responsibility:

#1 — I have to struggle.

No future and no humanity, no communism and no anarchy is worthy of the sacrifice of my life. From the day that I discovered myself, I have considered MYSELF as the supreme PURPOSE.

— Renzo Novatore

Revolutionary struggle can and should be exhilarating, liberating, worth doing even when there are no victories in sight. But it is still *about* something other than me, even if that something looks distant and out-of-focus. No matter how deeply some of us no longer believe that the world will change, we still know who our enemies are. There are intentional and potentially heated conversations to be had about who or what constitutes an enemy but all I'm asking for here is that some of us come together on the grounds that we *should* be here, and that we can't just be in it for ourselves. Anarchy isn't a utopian endpoint but it can be a real direction, and we can evaluate our actions in terms of whether they brought us closer or further from it, even if that evaluation remains subjective. We have to do that, because if we are just doing what makes us each feel good then we might as well be eating nice food and taking long bubble baths. I would like to assert that participation in anarchist struggle is *better* (and yes that's an ethical, maybe even moral, term) than eating nice food and taking comforting baths. It is not simply a matter of preference.

If some of us feel we “just happen” to “want” to fight for the freedom of all (for anarchy), I'd suggest that that feeling is not random, that it comes not from our primal desires but from a deeply rooted moral/ethical compass. Lucky are those who feel

that desire without working for it, but some people (and especially those with a lot of undeserved privileges) will feel they “want” to withdraw from struggle, or to amass property and live comfortably instead, or to cross the street when they see people of colour in “their” neighbourhood, and they must be challenged to do otherwise anyway, to do what they do not desire. All of us, privileged or not, have desires other than the desire to fight for freedom. And so we should, but we must do the hard work of picking and choosing what we want to feel, what we want to want. We must fight through what feels “natural” and instead determine which desires to keep, which to cultivate, and which to discard. Then we must do the difficult emotional work of making those feelings our own and acting accordingly.

If we only cared about our individual well-being, some of us (those with privilege and means) could do a lot better for ourselves than to participate in anarchist struggle. We could buy a huge expanse of land and hire or recruit a militia to defend it. We could become the bosses and politicians and exercise our will on others. But we don't! Even the richest among us don't do that. They know it wouldn't feel like freedom to do so, because we all know that our freedom, an anarchist freedom, isn't one where we live large and this hideous world swirls on around us, keeping others hungry or in cages.

Anarchy is a collective possibility, not an individual one. As is “freedom,” that slippery term that we find so difficult to define or justify because of course we have never experienced it, and possibly never will, but we feel its absence and plan our attacks accordingly. Anarchist freedom can't be at the expense of others; we can't restrict one person's freedom to gain our

own. We know that it wouldn't feel right or free to do so. Anarchist freedom is not an individual freedom. My second responsibility, then:

#2 — I have to support and defend others in their struggles for freedom because anarchist freedom is collective.

Oh, good people, listen to me again since I am so revolutionary that I barely even recognize myself! And do you know why I am a revolutionary who can barely be recognized? For a reason so simple that it is great in its simplicity. Here it is: because I am a revolutionary guided only by the vast and uncontrollable impulse of MY expansion of will and potential.

— Renzo Novatore

But I am not free if my interests are inseparable from yours.

— Sidney Parker

Why do so many of my people love, read and promote those who, like Novatore, romanticize elitism, the aristocracy, and radical selfishness? I think this “don't tread on me” attitude emerges in many cases from a place of frustration with the guilt and shame politics of liberal identity politicians and the false collectivism of socialist front groups and activist campaigns. Some of my comrades are so sick of being told that they are speaking and struggling in the wrong way, or in some cases that because of their social position they should not speak at all, that

they adopt a politics where they don't need to listen to others. Anybody who offers an opinion on their actions or questions their motivations is dismissed as a politician, a liberal, an enemy of some sort. Some of these people speak as if they have rejected analyses of structural power altogether. This is understandable but it will do us no good as anarchists.

Much of the structural analysis that taught us and other radicals about our own undeserved privileges and oppressions, powers and constraints has been coopted by people who do not support revolutionary struggle but rather want to preserve the status quo. In recent years even the Canadian state is using language that was once the language of revolutionary thought—words like rape culture, systemic racism, and decolonization. Rather than abandoning our analysis altogether, we must remember that those concepts in their authentic forms are still radical concepts. “They” can never actually mean these words without forecasting their own demise, because the end of racism, rape culture, or colonialism will only happen with the end of the state and capitalism, and they are the states and the capitalists. Some activists, and even some anarchists, have made the mistake of ignoring this reality in the service of populism and cooperation with power, celebrating every time a court or politician “acknowledges” rape culture, and expressing outrage when the Canadian government fails to “adequately address” colonialism (the source of its very existence, the thing that makes it a Canadian government at all). These misguided comrades may have given some nice words to the politicians but they did not give them exclusive domain over the idea that social position matters.

Those of us who want no state and

no capitalism need to remain attentive to social position even when the words to do it are being taken from our mouths by politicians, because only analyses of structural power can remind us that our desires are not natural, innate, or random but rather the product of our social conditions, conditions structured by colonization, racism, capitalism and patriarchy. That knowledge is *especially* important if we are to build politics and practices in which these same desires are a guiding force. We must evaluate them, consider where they come from and whether we want to hold them, before acting on them or trying to build a world in which we can live them.

One of the things that makes us uniquely human is our vast capacity for self-awareness and thus self-work. *We can change our feelings.* We do it all the time in our daily lives—when we love someone but get rejected, when we realize our previously held goals are unattainable, when we find ourselves in conflict with somebody who we know we want to keep around. We feel all kinds of things, but we evaluate, we decide to reject the feelings or move on from them. We decide which feelings to sit with, which to hold on to and act on and which to ignore or even try not to feel. We are not usually ruled by our feelings and we are not stuck with them. This makes it easier to deal with the fact that so often our desires come to us directly from the conditions given to us by our enemies, and are in many cases flaws to be left behind more than they are compasses by which to guide our actions. To build a liberatory practice that feels joyful and true to ourselves but that does not look to constrain the joys and desires of others, we must be at least as critical of our own desires as we are of those who seek to deny them. This means keeping an awareness of our social

positions and of the forces that are shaping our individual desires in mind.

That said, when we are given an opportunity to listen and learn and feel the needs and wants of others, especially those whose freedoms are even more denied by this world than our own, we must do so. There is no other way to know if we're freeing ourselves of desires that are conditioned by our (unjustly assigned) social position. We can take part in this liberating process on an informal and individual basis, and we can choose who to listen to and when based on our own, carefully developed, ethical standpoints and choices, but we can not neglect it entirely.

Again, anarchists know that freedom will have to be collective because we know that our freedom can't be gained by constraining others'. We will have to listen with humility to evaluate our actions on these terms, because we can't trust our first impulses in a world where social conditioning is one of the greatest weapons of the police state. This is a duty shared by all those who struggle, and struggle is in itself a duty of all those who know the horror of this world, so in a sense this is a duty shared by nearly everyone. My third responsibility:

#3 — Because our anarchist freedom is a mutual/shared freedom, and because the system keeps us in line not only with guns but with manufactured desires, I have to listen and learn from others so that I can know if I am free or unfree.

So far, I have three examples of “responsibilities” or “duties,” things I must do even if they don't feel easy, joyful

or comfortable. I think if others were to do this exercise, they might come up with different phrasing or different emphases, and for me that is not a problem. What's not okay is for us to imagine duty and responsibility as somehow antithetical to anarchy and freedom. Without them it seems highly unlikely that we'll ever experience any kind of anarchic freedom at all.

Many, if not most, of us will undoubtedly fail to uphold our responsibilities again and again! Responsibility can't work if we see it only as conditional, reciprocal or mutual. We must stay true to what we know, even when others will not, and try anyway.

We must do the right thing (the anarchist thing, the revolutionary thing) even when it feels hopeless, even if it feels like we're all alone. Luckily that duty includes above most things our duty to wage war against our enemies, and we have already found ways to find joy in that place. Luckily it also includes freeing ourselves as much as possible from a world of rat-races and horizontal hostility, so we need not experience the pain and guilt of stepping on others quite as much as those who choose not to join our fight. Luckily it entails building deep and far-reaching relationships of knowledge and struggle that will often blossom into friendships, one of the few escapes we have from the alienation of capitalist society.

It is unfortunate that we are so broken, so conditioned by the world we're seeking to destroy, that the activity it takes to destroy it will not always feel right or good or natural to all of us. Those of us who are blessed to retain a spirit of rebellion, a simple and innate desire to struggle, are no better, capable or deserving of freedom than those who are not. We all share the responsibility to do everything we can

to end this world of oppression, control and domination—for ourselves, for our friends, and for millions who we have never met.

To all the rebels, and to all those who know what side we're on. Let's build anarchy together!



**Anarcho-
Nietzscheans
& the Question
of Anarchist
Ethics**

Anarcho-Nietzscheans & the Question of Anarchist Ethics

Introduction

For the past 100 or so years anarchists have frequently claimed that anarchist struggle is, by nature, a struggle *against* morality. While the reasons for opposing morality might change depending on whom you ask or read, I argue here that such claims are generally underwritten by a distinctly Nietzschean logic. Indeed, one of Nietzsche's most oft-cited proposals is his argument against morality. The anarchists who have adopted a Nietzschean anti-moral framework inherit the contradictory and often contentious intellectual history of Nietzsche's ideas. Often, they reproduce the worst of Nietzsche, disavowing inherent ethical responsibilities to others, and affirming, in the place of ethics, a strong and willful self-producing subject who will know what to do through individual desire alone.

Against such positions, I assert that anarchism has always been an ethical claim. That is, an anarchist opposition to the current social order cannot be separated from an ethical objection to the relations of domination that uphold this world. Meanwhile, our co-constituting subjectivities, the inescapable interdependencies that underpin our lives, demand ethical attention. In order to know how to struggle, we will need forms of ethical knowledge to help us navigate the terrains of power, desire, care, and violence that we inevitably find ourselves negotiating.

To this end, I will begin with a close reading of Nietzsche's anti-moral claims in order to assess how and where these

positions have taken root among anarchists. I will then examine more closely some common anarchist arguments against morality, asking what these concerns mean for a project of anarchist ethics. Ultimately, I will propose a number of directions for thinking about ethics as anarchists.

Some Notes on Choices of Terminology

The distinction—or lack thereof—between morality and ethics¹ is sometimes disputed among anarchists. Broadly, *morality* is often explained as those restrictive social rules that govern the distinction between right and wrong so as to shore up the legitimacy of institutions of domination, (the easiest example being the dictums of the Catholic church.) As a counter-point, we have *ethics*, an evaluation of action that stems from the negotiations between comrades or 'personal' sensibilities, (here we might think of an agreement between comrades not to snitch.) Those who maintain that there is an essential distinction between these two concepts generally reject *morality* while avowing *ethics*. And while these *ethics* often propose that we have some responsibility towards those around us, this is certainly not always the case. Across anarchist texts it is in fact hard to find much consistency in how ethics and morality should be

1 It's worth noting here that these words are simply the descendants of the respective latin and greek words *moralis* and *ethos*, indicating social customs or mores.

differentiated.

English language lexicographers² define the distinction between morality and ethics in essentially the opposite way that many anarchists do. Ask a lexicographer and they might tell you that it is *morality* that refers to personal sensibilities, while *ethics* are socially adopted (and generally institutional) rule systems. Think of *medical ethics*, for instance, a set of principles that governs the behaviours of doctors as a whole. Meanwhile, moral philosophers will generally refuse the distinction entirely, using the two terms interchangeably. Philosophers working in the continental tradition will tend to prefer the term ‘ethics’ and will sometimes use ‘morality’ in a way that more closely resembles the conventional anarchist

usage of this term. In some ways we might even read the often cited ethics — morality split as a tension between Anglo-American *moral philosophy* and post-structuralist, continental *ethics*. Given the popularity of certain prominent continental philosophers (‘theory’) in parts of the anarchist subculture, we might even see this as a tension that some anarchists have inherited.

I am generally of the opinion that ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are not meaningfully different concepts, not because all the proposed distinctions between these ideas are useless, but because they are so varied, so inherently contradictory, that distilling some *essential* difference is all but impossible. Because I have little interest in focusing on semantic debates about particular definitions of these terms I will leave the discussion of etymologies and colloquial usages at this. I hope instead to engage with the spirit of these ideas: a general concern for how we know what to do and how to live together.

I have a slight preference for the term ‘ethics’ and will therefore tend to describe my project as a project of *ethics* rather than as a project of *morality*. Ethics, as I understand it, broadly refers to the means through which we assess the value of human action. In particular, I am interested in what ethics tells us about how to evaluate and modify our actions in response to an intrinsic responsibility to other people. I will use the term ‘morality’ mostly when directly discussing texts and thinkers who have used this particular term.

I will use *juridical ethics* to mean those moral systems that seek to establish abstract and fixed moral rules against which any given action can be evaluated. Such universalist codes of rights and rules

2 I specify *English* language lexicographers here, because French speakers will tend to distinguish between *la morale* (morality) and *l'éthique* (ethics) in ways that don't map neatly onto English definitions of these terms. French resources on these topics, whether lexicographic or philosophical, generally agree that there is *some* distinction between these terms, while offering varying conclusions about *what* this distinction might be. To summarize crudely: *la morale* is often understood to describe the entirety of rules and principles governing right action in a given society (that is to say the moral system of particular society), while *l'éthique* is an argumented and theoretical reflection on values upon which moral principles might be based. To complicate this further, certain French philosophers are prone to associating *la morale* with a Kantian tradition that concerns itself with absolute rules and the distinction between right and wrong (*le bien et le mal*), while associating *l'éthique* with a Spinozist tradition of the reasoned search for happiness and the distinction between good and bad (*bon ou mauvais*). It is worth noting the French language distinctions between ethics and morality when we consider the widespread influence of ‘French Theory’ among contemporary English speaking anarchists.

not only obscure the particularities of ethical exchange but are also coercively enforced through systems of punishment.³ The anarchist turn towards Nietzschean anti-morality often seems to reflect its appeal as a possible path out of the grip of juridical ethics. However, while many anarchists who claim to be “against morality” seem to mean that they oppose *juridical ethics*, as I have defined them above, this is hardly a clear or consistent position. A number of other anarchists seem to mean something much more vague, along the lines of “we shouldn’t have opinions about how others should act.”

Nietzsche himself makes no distinction between ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’, and the things that he attacks as ‘morality’ extend far beyond the scope of juridical ethics. While much of Nietzsche’s critique does indeed focus on forms of moral obligation that are juridical or coercive, Nietzsche also repudiates other forms of relationality that could conceivably be the basis of some other sort of ethics, in particular, relations of care and interdependence. Instead, Nietzsche decries these forms of relatedness for their alleged incubation of weakness and “herd mentality,” and seeks to free the ‘Sovereign Individual’

from their constraints. Further, while Nietzsche seeks to overcome all current moral structures, his wholesale disavowal of any model of moral valuation is in fact quite partial and rife with contradiction. Not only does he seem to affirm that there could be some future, better version of morality, but he often lauds past systems of valuation, proposing them as models for new ones. The contradictions embedded in Nietzsche’s critique of morality make the consistent use of his terminology impossible. It is difficult to resuscitate something we might call ethics from the ashes of his anti-morality, and yet Nietzsche’s own use of the word ‘morality’ makes his rejection of it far from total.

Nietzsche’s Anti-Moral Claims

While the thread of anti-morality appears in many of his major texts, Nietzsche’s claims regarding morality are most clearly laid out in *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. In both texts, Nietzsche seeks to evaluate how we are served by morality in a general sense. In *Genealogy*, Nietzsche tries to trace the historical development of morality through stories about past social and moral relations. This approach allows him to stage his arguments against morality by demonstrating that morality is not a fixed framework. The stories Nietzsche tells have very little relation to historical reality and can most generously be read as parables that illustrate some of Nietzsche’s key claims.⁴

3 In formulating this definition, I am borrowing heavily from Michel Foucault’s discussion of moralities in the juridical age in *The Use of Pleasure*, along with the work of various feminist ethicists who have critiqued the unitary (and implicitly male) subject of abstract moral rights. Foucault, incidentally, employed his own particular and idiosyncratic definitions of ‘morality’ and ‘ethics,’ and would no doubt disagree with my own use of the latter term.

See: Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc. 1990), 25 – 30.

4 David Graeber makes this point quite cogently in *Debt*.

See: David Graeber, *Debt* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2011), 78 – 79.

According to Nietzsche's narrative, good and bad were initially defined by a ruling class of nobles, who evaluated themselves as "good" and associate this quality with happiness, fortune, and power. Mirroring this assessment, those people belonging to the subjugated class were evaluated as "bad." This evaluation is an afterthought, and only happens in reference to their lack *vis à vis* a predefined good.⁵ The subjugated then feel hatred for the masters and oppressors, which Nietzsche terms *ressentiment*.⁶

By Nietzsche's account, the priests begin the transmutation of this classical moral framework. The Jews in particular, whom Nietzsche describes as a "priestly people"—that is to say, weak, powerless and vengeful—mobilize their hatred for their oppressors in order to induce "a radical revaluation of [noble] values, that is [...] an act of spiritual revenge."⁷

The Jews invert the morality of the nobles so that noble and powerful now means evil, while good means powerless, weak and oppressed. Importantly, this new notion of good is rooted in hatred and revenge. Nietzsche writes:

It was the Jews who in opposition to the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of god) dared its inversion with fear-inspiring consistency, and held it fast with teeth of the most unfathomable hate (the hate of powerlessness), namely: "the miserable alone are good; the poor,

powerless, lonely alone are good; the suffering deprived sick ugly, are also the only pious, the only blessed in God, for them alone there is blessedness,—whereas you, you noble and powerful ones, you are in all eternity the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless, you will eternally be the wretched, the accursed, the damned!"...⁸

This reevaluation of good and bad is what Nietzsche describes as the *slave revolt in morality*. The new morality that is born of this process is *Slave Morality*.

Nietzsche's story does not end with the Jews. Christianity takes up the Jewish hatred and transforms it again by parading it as love. Rather than hatred for the evil oppressors, the focus is now love for the poor, powerless and weak, or what Nietzsche describes as "blessedness and victory to the poor and wretched."⁹ Nor does this new valuation stop with Christianity; it quickly spreads beyond the walls of the Church, infecting society with the values of equality and democracy, which Nietzsche associates with *Slave Morality*.¹⁰

To understand the conclusions that Nietzscheans draw from this parable, we need to look at Nietzsche's account of *the subject*.¹¹ Interestingly, Nietzsche's subject has no inherent attributes; its qualities are its actions. He writes: "There is no being behind the doing, effecting, becoming, 'the doer' is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing is everything."¹² Nietzsche uses this perspective on subjectivity to attack any conception of accountability between

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 19–21.

⁶ Ibid., 19.
Note that "ressentiment" is merely the French word for resentment.

⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ Ibid., 16–17.

⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹¹ The person or entity who acts and observes.

¹² Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 25.

subjects. According to him, Slave Morality espouses that the strong are free to be weak. However, as strength exists only inasmuch as it is enacted, one cannot expect the strong to be weak for they have no meaningful choice in the matter. Nietzsche claims that this would be like saying a bird of prey is free not to be a bird of prey and is thus accountable for it's being a bird of prey.¹³ Thus, the notion of free will as a basis for intersubjective accountability is, according to Nietzsche, merely a fallacy of Slave Morality.

This framework denies any inherent accountability between subjects. Further, Nietzsche views the expectation that the powerful might be accountable for their power as both breeding passivity and essentially denying our animal nature. This latter claim can be best understood by examining the relationship between the Nietzschean concepts of Life and the "Will to Power". For Nietzsche, life consists most fundamentally of the deployment of the strength of a living thing; "relations of supremacy" are inherent to life.¹⁴ Nietzsche's "Will to Power" is the stuff of life: an animal instinct for domination and a creative force of "spontaneous attacking, infringing, reinterpreting, reordering."¹⁵ According to Nietzsche, this Will to Power explains all natural phenomena.¹⁶ If Slave Morality is to deny the violent and dominating nature of life itself, it follows that such a moral order breeds passivity. For Nietzsche, this passivity is paramount to

the *man of resentment*, who is prudent and dishonest, whose morality is humble and non-violent, who makes weakness seem like a virtue of choice by investing the subject with free will.¹⁷

Nietzsche's account of subjectivity differs somewhat from variants of individualism that rely on a subject with intrinsic and static qualities. However, an individual that exists primarily in relation to itself remains at the heart of his theories. Not only does this individual produce its own qualities, but it generates values outside of social relationships. Throughout his texts, Nietzsche generally affirms those values he describes as noble values, that is to say, the values of the powerful. Unlike Slave Morality, whose origin is found in a relation to an other, noble values stem from an affirmative relation to the self. Nietzsche writes: "All noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself."¹⁸ In this model, valuation—the assessment of what is good—is cut off from any sort of relationships.

The self-affirming noble described by Nietzsche approaches his ideal of the *Sovereign Individual*. The Sovereign Individual has overcome relational morality and is only responsible to himself.¹⁹ This radical state of unattachedness is Nietzsche's definition of freedom.²⁰ He describes the Sovereign Individual as: "the individual resembling

¹³ Ibid., 25–26.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Project Gutenberg, 2013), 48. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4363>

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 52.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 87.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹ I have not bothered to rephrase Nietzsche's ideas using gender neutral language as his claims quite explicitly exclude non-male subjects.

²⁰ David Graeber's *Debt* again refutes the historical validity of this claim.

only himself, free again from the morality of custom, autonomous and supermoral (for autonomous and moral are mutually exclusive), in short the human being with his own independent long will, the human being who is *permitted to promise*.²¹ Responsibility originates with a responsibility to the self, but the unattached Sovereign Individual, having overcome any social claims of responsibility, might subsequently begin to make promises to other sovereigns.

While Nietzsche's model of autonomy revolves around the self-affirmation of the individual who can then enter into relation with other self-affirming individuals, it is important to note that Nietzsche does not assume that all relationships between people should (or could) look like the relations between Sovereign Individuals. Rather, Nietzsche's self-mastery also entails mastery over those weaker beings who are unable to master themselves. He writes: "...this mastery over himself also necessarily brings with it mastery over circumstances, over nature and all lesser-willed and more unreliable creatures..."²² Sovereignty, for Nietzsche, not only implies autonomy and self-governance, but also a hierarchical power relation—*sovereignty over*. This 'power over' sense of sovereignty is essential to the constitution of Nietzsche's individual, whose sovereignty is derived not only from his self-mastery but also from his mastery of others. Likewise, Nietzsche's notion of 'will' is also constituted by domination; for him all willing "is absolutely a question of commanding and obeying."²³

²¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 36.

²² Ibid.

²³ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 47.

Nietzsche quite explicitly does not posit this model as a universally available mode of subjectivity; in other words, we can't all be 'Sovereign Individuals'. Rather, "It is the business of the very few to be independent; it is a privilege of the strong."²⁴ Meanwhile, the majority of people exist for "service and general utility."²⁵ Indeed, Nietzsche harbours a particular disgust for the "common man," those weak humans whose only fate is to submit to the ultimate domination of Sovereign Individuals. He describes these "descendants of slavery" as a "regression of humankind[...] disgusting, deformed, reduced, atrophied, poisoned."²⁶

Essentially, the ethical model proposed by Nietzsche is this: We begin with the 'Sovereign Individual' who has achieved subjecthood through self-mastery and self-affirmation. Intersubjective relations emerge after this act of self-formation, when the Sovereign Individual starts making promises to other sovereigns. Conscience emerges from the responsibility generated by these promises. This process is only available to a few, rather than being the general condition of moral relations. To be quite clear, Nietzsche's model essentially proposes not only that weak and common beings cannot be accounted for in his framework of autonomy and responsibility, but that these "disgusting" creatures lack conscience itself.

Another concept that figures prominently in Nietzsche's critique of morality is 'Guilt'. According to Nietzsche, guilt has its origin in the "material institution

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 72.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 91–92.

²⁶ Ibid., 24.

of debt.”²⁷ In the story he tells, feelings of “exchange, contract, guilt, right, obligation [and] compensation” originate in economic exchange.²⁸ For Nietzsche, the relationship of an individual to the community is a creditor/debtor relationship, in which the individual incurs debts to the community. In this account, justice is generated by a moral framework in which given deeds are debts that must be paid off. The generalization of this principle requires the creations of moral laws — rules about what is just and unjust.²⁹ Nietzsche understands morality as laws that exist in order to preserve the cohesion of the community, while immorality is defined as that which poses a threat to the community.³⁰

Nietzsche rejects this moral framework, which identifies certain acts as immoral, in part because he finds that anti-social acts are an essential part of life. For Nietzsche, morality and the social relations that generate it are against life itself. We are reminded that Nietzsche believes that “life itself is ESSENTIALLY appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation.”³¹ Not only does life require tyranny, but relations of tyranny cannot be defined as unjust because “life acts essentially — that is in its basic functions — in an injuring, violating, pillaging, destroying manner and cannot

be thought at all without this character.”³²

Nietzsche attacks morality for its perceived rejection of our essential animal instincts. According to him, these destructive power-seeking instincts remain and must find other outlets. In particular we turn these violent instincts against ourselves, resulting in *Bad Consciousness*.³³

Bad Consciousness and Guilt result in the positive evaluation of that which is unegotistic, a condition that necessarily engenders “self-maltreatment.”³⁴ Meanwhile, moralization is the combined effect of guilt and duty, concepts which are themselves passed back into Bad Consciousness. Nietzsche’s notion of Bad Consciousness is important because it again illustrates how his rejection of morality is based in the supreme valorization of a self-affirming subject. The subtext is that claims of an ethics of inherent responsibility to others should be rejected, not just because it supposedly incurs weakness and unfreedom, but because it produces bad feelings.

While I remain largely unconvinced by Nietzsche’s assessment of moral relations, anarchist critiques of morality are not baseless and the task of determining our moral or ethical responsibilities to each other is one rife with contradictions. While moral thought is a broad and heterogeneous field, most systems of moral knowing are not at all anarchist. In order to take the project of anarchist ethics seriously, we should consider carefully the appeals and strengths of anti-moral claims. I propose that the most recurrently convincing of these is the

²⁷ Ibid., 39.

²⁸ Ibid., 45.

²⁹ Ibid., 50.

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 188.

³¹ Ibid., 348.

³² Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 50.

³³ Ibid., 48–49.

³⁴ Ibid., 59.

break with juridical ethics (specifically) that most anti-moral knowledge systems seem to provide. Exploding the category of “morality” offers an appealing rebuke to a laundry list of ideas widely rejected by anarchists: *abortion is wrong, debaucherous lesbian orgies are wrong, stealing from work is wrong, robbing banks is wrong, hurting cops is wrong, punching a nazi is wrong, lying in court is wrong*, and innumerable other examples. When such claims are the intransigent and unquestioned components of a coercive system of externalized rules designed to maintain social control, finding ways to rebut them is not only compelling but necessary. However, while finding methods of ethical evaluation that can avoid the traps of juridical ethics is an important task for anarchists, I maintain that Nietzsche’s thoughts offer us very little towards this end. Further, anarchist thinkers that have taken up Nietzschean arguments against morality are prone to reproducing many harmful aspects of his thinking.

Anarcho-Nietzscheans

In the last 100 or so years many anarchists have taken up Nietzsche’s critique of morality, both implicitly and explicitly. This is true both in the informal discourses of contemporary anarchist subculture and in the texts from which this subculture draws inspiration and analysis. Some thinkers have cited Nietzsche directly, while others have simply reproduced arguments whose logics seem to have come from Nietzsche, either directly, or passed on through a variety of intellectual histories. While Nietzsche’s anarchist heirs are diverse, including ‘classical’ red anarchists like Emma Goldman and Rudolf Rocker, and the many more

contemporary anarchists who have encountered Nietzsche by reading French theory, I am particularly interested in the ways in which anarchist individualists have taken up Nietzsche’s claims.³⁵ Not only is it in the proposals of these latter anarchists that I have mostly frequently encountered distinctly Nietzschean accounts of both morality and the individual, but it is also here that the limits of Nietzschean anti-moralities can be most keenly felt. I will therefore focus on several historic and present-day anarchist individualists whose writings have contributed to the popularity of Nietzsche-inflected positions against morality among anarchists.

Among these prominent anarchist conduits for Nietzsche’s ideas are Renzo Novatore and Wolfi Landstreicher. Novatore was an early 20th century Italian anarchist individualist and illegalist. Along with Stirner, Nietzsche is widely considered one of his foundational influences.³⁶ His works have proven influential among contemporary anarchists in part because they have been translated and circulated by Wolfi Landstreicher. Landstreicher’s own writings have significantly influenced contemporary anarchist thought, especially among North American individualists, fuelling the widespread uptake of Nietzschean anti-moralism in anarchist subcultures. While Landstreicher rarely cites Nietzsche directly, his influence is

35 For a more thorough discussion of the left history of Nietzsche,

See:

Spencer Sunshine, “Nietzsche and the Anarchists,” Fifth Estate 367 (Winter 2004–2005): 36–37.

36 Renzo Novatore, “Biographical Note,” in *Towards the Creative Nothing* (The Anarchist Library, 2009), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/renzo-novatore-toward-the-creative-nothing>.

apparent. Meanwhile, the popularity of a recently published volume *Nietzsche and Anarchy*, by Shahin, demonstrates the persistent appeal of Nietzschean ideas to anarchists, particularly those professing some sort of individualist bent. In particular, I am concerned with what the *implementation* of anti-moral claims means for anarchist struggle. To this end I will draw on both Nietzsche's original texts and the works of anarchists who have subsequently reproduced his arguments against morality in order to examine the challenges and possibilities of producing an anarchist ethics.

Against All Authority?

One of the main problems with Nietzsche's position on morality is that the framework in which it exists is inherently authoritarian. Nietzsche expresses a palpable disgust for the "common man" along with a quite overt desire to subjugate this repugnant creature. Not only does Nietzsche reserve sovereignty and actualization for those worthy aristocrats who possess sufficient "will", but the mastery that Nietzsche espouses is not only self-mastery as sometimes suggested, but also (and inherently) mastery over others, that is, those "lesser-willed and more unreliable creatures..."³⁷ Nietzsche maintains a sort of Hobbesian view of life as a brutal existence of raping, pillaging, murdering, and war. However, unlike Hobbes, who concludes that such nature demands an absolute state authority to curtail it, Nietzsche rejects both the state and morality precisely *because he avows* raping, pillaging, murdering, and war as laudable activities.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 36.

Nietzsche's rejection of morality must then be understood not only as a rejection of the constraints on the self-actualization of the individual but also a rejection of ideas that might constrain individuals from dominating others. While most anarchists who have taken up Nietzsche's claims reject their most overtly autocratic articulations, the fact that celebrated anarchist figures like Renzo Novatore have embraced at least some of these authoritarian logics should certainly alarm us.

Novatore adopts an array of Nietzschean concepts. Of particular interest to us is his rejection of morality in favour of a destructive and dominating violence that will be unleashed upon society by those who sufficiently embody a Nietzschean "aristocracy." Much like Nietzsche, Novatore sees morality as a "tyrannical" force linked to law and society that infringes upon the unbridled will of the "I."³⁸ This view leads him to reject "duty," "pity," "altruism," "solidarity" and even "friendship" and instead to espouse an enthusiasm for the creative potential of "hatred," "violence" and "cruelty."³⁹ Yet, while Novatore rejects morality for its perceived tyranny he also subscribes to a worldview in which life is inevitably underpinned by other relations of domination. Novatore echoes Nietzsche's notions of Life and 'Will to Power' when he asserts that "living means: dominating and being

³⁸ Renzo Novatore, *Towards the Creative Nothing* (The Anarchist Library, 2009), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/renzo-novatore-toward-the-creative-nothing>.

³⁹ In *Towards the Creative Nothing* Novatore writes of friendship: "Fortunate are those who have drunk from its chalice without having their souls offended or poisoned. If one such person exists, I urge them to send me their photograph. I'm sure to look upon the face of an idiot."

dominated!”⁴⁰ Novatore is not interested in eliminating domination as a general condition but rather in freeing himself, as an individual, from the position of being dominated. This goal entails acquiring the capacity to dominate others.

This perspective converges with another Nietzschean line. For Novatore, ‘Anarchy’ is not for everyone but rather for those few noble ones who possess sufficient will to deserve it. He writes that “the noble one, even in Anarchy — *or rather, in anarchy more than in any other form of human life together*—will enjoy pleasure that others would not be able to enjoy, even if he, for love of them, wanted to renounce them. *Anarchy is therefore the natural Autocracy of the noble.*”⁴¹ Just as Nietzsche’s Sovereign Individual is “alone permitted to make promises” and defines himself through his domination of the weak and unworthy common man, Novatore’s Anarchy seems to espouse absolute power for the “libertarian aristocracy,” distinct from the majority of humans who lack the adequate qualities to enjoy the fruits of Anarchy. He writes “Anarchy—for me—means: Autocracy of beauty, of genius, of art, *and of all those who possess the willful and selective qualities suitable for dominating* and that mother nature — justly or unjustly — grants and lavishes so generously on a few, while she denies them to most, as if the latter were her bastard children!”⁴² Novatore’s

love affair with Nietzschean elitism demonstrates a dangerous slippage: rejecting morality is not merely an attack on another mechanism of control or pacification but also an affirmation of relations of domination, which Novatore attempts to make coherent with an anarchist politic by reserving Anarchy for those who possess the correct qualities.

On the Gendered Substance of Moral Relations

While my main concern in engaging with Nietzsche’s claims against morality is unpacking their broader ethical implications, it is difficult to do this without taking a short detour to consider the implications of Nietzsche’s views on women, Jews, and other hated social elements. With regards to women, it is indisputable that Nietzsche is a misogynist. The question remains: what are the implications of these ideas for anarchist engagement with his thoughts? There are a number of readily available answers here: In one we could attack most dead-white-male-philosophers for writing despicable things, and, with a sort of self-justifying “gotcha” approach, arrive at a wholesale discounting of most of western thought.⁴³ In another, we could take-up the oft-espoused practice of “charitable reading”, essentially reading out the unsavoury elements of a text and chalking them up to the regrettable errors of history. In a third, we could adopt the motto “take what we like, burn the rest”, making all thought available to our pillaging,

⁴⁰ Renzo Novatore, *Revolt of the Unique*, trans. Wolfi Landstreicher (The Anarchist Library, 2017), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/renzo-novatore-the-revolt-of-the-unique>.

⁴¹ Novatore, *Revolt*. Emphasis mine.

⁴² Novatore, *Revolt*. Emphasis mine. The phrase “libertarian aristocracy” appears in *Towards the Creative Nothing*, and is seemingly a modification of Nietzsche’s notion of

“aristocracy.”

⁴³ This might arguably not be a bad thing, but far exceeds the scope of what I’m trying to do here.

regardless of its problems.⁴⁴ I contend that none of these approaches serve us particularly well in understanding the implications of the ideas proposed in a given body of thought. In addressing such uncomfortable elements we should ask: First, to what extent does this logic underpin the main ideas proposed? And second, how does bringing a particular critical framework help us better understand the implications of the main ideas in question?

Following this approach, I propose that thinking about how Nietzsche understands women, gender and masculinity is not only fundamental to understanding his thoughts on domination and responsibility towards others but also elucidates key implications of his moral (or anti-moral) proposals. In brief, an understanding of empathy and care as weak, feminine values forms a constitutive subtext to Nietzsche's anti-moral claims. Throughout his texts, these values are repeatedly positioned in opposition to the schema of a man who ascends to true masculinity through his superiority and domination over others, and particularly women. In one of his lengthier discussions of the nature of relationships between men and women Nietzsche writes:

As regards a woman, for instance, the control over her body and her sexual gratification serves as an amply sufficient

sign of ownership and possession to the more modest man; another with a more suspicious and ambitious thirst for possession, sees the 'questionableness,' the mere apparentness of such ownership, and wishes to have finer tests in order to know especially whether the woman not only gives herself to him, but also gives up for his sake what she has or would like to have—only THEN does he look upon her as 'possessed.' A third, however, has not even here got to the limit of his distrust and his desire for possession: he asks himself whether the woman, when she gives up everything for him, does not perhaps do so for a phantom of him; he wishes first to be thoroughly, indeed, profoundly well known; in order to be loved at all he ventures to let himself be found out. Only then does he feel the beloved one fully in his possession, when she no longer deceives herself about him, when she loves him just as much for the sake of his devilry and concealed insatiability, as for his goodness, patience, and spirituality.⁴⁵

It should be apparent here that the particularities of a given man's ownership of (that is to say, sovereignty over) a woman is fundamentally constitutive of his self-mastery. In this schema, man is able to most thoroughly possess a woman by engaging her in the production of his individuality. The sovereignty of the Sovereign Individual is thus not only contingent on sovereignty over other "lesser-willed" creatures but on *gendered domination in particular*. The web of power envisioned here also unwittingly reveals the fallacy of the autonomously self-producing individual. Even as Nietzsche purports that the subject might free itself of compulsory relations to others, he embeds its production within a knot of unchosen commitments. However, because half of this productive relationship entails a female subject who,

⁴⁴ Here we can consider Landstreicher's take on the adoption of ideas in "Plundering the Arsenal" when he writes: "...we will see the revolutionary past as an arsenal to be plundered, joyfully grasping whatever is useful to our present struggle." Anecdotally, I have heard anarchists reference this text in a "we have things to learn from fascists" way.

See:

Wolfgang Landstreicher, "Plundering the Arsenal" in *Willful Disobedience*, (San Francisco Bay Area: Ardent Press, 2009), 143.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 126–127. Emphasis mine.

by definition, will never attain sovereignty, he can occlude from his account the ways in which subjects are necessarily produced relationally.

Further, Nietzsche equates any reduction in gendered domination with the most hated of bogeymen: democracy. He writes: “The weaker sex has in no previous age been treated with so much respect by men as at present — this belongs to the tendency and fundamental taste of democracy.”⁴⁶ While I have little interest in defending the project of democracy, this choice of terminology should not allow us to flinch away from the clear authoritarianism of Nietzsche’s claim. The point here is not a repudiation of democracy as a particular form of governance, but a general revulsion towards those perceived to be weak, and forms of social relations purporting any sort of egalitarian outcome. Nietzsche’s equation of such tendencies with the increased social standing of women reveals the project implied by his claims against equality: an intensification of patriarchal power.

Finally, the feminized weakness that Nietzsche so reviles must be understood as a counter-point to the unattached ‘Sovereign Individual’ as a masculine subject. He writes:

There is nowadays, throughout almost the whole of Europe, a sickly irritability and sensitiveness towards pain, and also a repulsive irrestrainableness in complaining, an effeminizing, which, with the aid of religion and philosophical nonsense, seeks to deck itself out as something superior — there is a regular cult of suffering. The UNMANLINESS of that which is called ‘sympathy’ by such groups of visionaries, is always, I believe, the

*first thing that strikes the eye.*⁴⁷

Here, we see that Nietzsche’s repudiation of responsibility towards the other is fundamentally rooted in his misogyny. It is not just that he equates women with weak, snivelling victims, but also that his equation of sympathy and care with femininity is his basis for rejecting them.

Nietzsche’s take on women and gender is perhaps most interesting to us because of the echoes that can be found in the works of anarchists who have taken up his anti-moral claims. Regarding his opinion of women, Renzo Novatore writes: “The most brutal of enslaved beasts. The greatest victim shuffling on earth. And, after man, the most responsible for her problems. I’d be curious to know what goes through her mind when I kiss her.”⁴⁸ For Novatore, as for Nietzsche, woman represents the epitome of victimization through self-inflicted weakness. She is an opaque subject whose mysteries might be probed through sexual access.

More recently, Wolfi Landstreicher has argued in a number of texts that feminism epitomizes a logic of victimization and an embrace of weakness. Under another pseudonym, Feral Faun, Landstreicher penned “The Ideology of Victimization.” In this text he describes his displeasure at passing a piece of graffiti proclaiming that “men rape”, asserting that he, *a man*, has never desired to rape anyone, nor, he claims, have any of his

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 207.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 292.

⁴⁸ Novatore, *Towards*.

“bepenissed” friends.⁴⁹ Landstreicher then speculates about the provenance of this graffiti, asserting that it can only have been written by a misguided feminist woman. The rest of the text largely goes on to decry feminism, broadly defined, as an “ideology of victimization.” This could just as easily be described as an argument that feminism is Slave Morality in other terms. Landstreicher writes that “the essence of these social roles within the framework of these ‘liberation’ ideologies is victimhood. So the litanies of wrongs suffered must be sung over and over to guarantee the

49 Feral Faun, “The Ideology of Victimization,” *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* 32, (Spring 1992). Retrieved from anti-politics.org in 2018. <http://anti-politics.org/feral-faun/ideology-of-victimization.html>.

There’s a certain irony here, given that Landstreicher’s take on “free love” essentially proposes that “strong-willed” individuals should enact their erotic desires upon others at will, and that if “weak” people are hurt (sorry, “feel hurt”) by these interactions, it is their own fault for being so weak in the first place. In “Against the Logic of Submission,” Landstreicher writes:

One of the most significant obstacles presently facing us in this area is pity for weakness and neurosis. There are individuals who know clearly what they desire in each potential loving encounter, people who can act and respond with a projectual clarity that only those who have made their passions and desires their own can have. But when these individuals act on their desires, if another who is less sure of themselves is unnerved or has their feelings hurt, they are expected to change their behavior to accommodate the weakness of this other person. Thus the strong-willed individual who has grasped the substance of free love and begun to live it often finds herself suppressed or ostracized by his own supposed comrades.

See:

Wolff Landstreicher “Against the Logic of Submission” in *Willful Disobedience*, (San Francisco Bay Area: Ardent Press, 2009), 103.

‘victims’ never forget that is what they are. These ‘radical’ liberation movements help to guarantee that the climate of fear never disappears, and that individuals continue to see themselves as weak and to see their strength as lying in the social roles which are, in fact, the source of their victimization.”⁵⁰ Like Nietzsche, Landstreicher equates a struggle against patriarchal domination with an attribution of positive value to the experience of victimization. The feminists Landstreicher imagines resemble Nietzsche’s slaves: they have embraced their experience of oppression as a source of virtue; a tactic that is at once a power move and something that renders them snivelling, weak, and impotent.⁵¹ Like Nietzsche’s slaves, they are consumed by their hatred for the oppressor class, in this case men. That Landstreicher does not even bother to illustrate his claims with an examination of any feminist thought or action whatsoever allows him to construct a homogenous and fictive counterpoint to attack and entirely avoid engagement with the much messier conflicts and debates that have always existed amongst those seeking liberation from gendered domination. Landstreicher suggests that feminists, writ large, have failed to actualize the “strength of their individuality.” Indeed, he seems to propose that the antidote to patriarchy is a universal cultivation of the correct personality traits (strength, independence, etc) and a refusal to discuss the relationship between social position and interpersonal dynamics.⁵²

50 Faun, “Ideology.”

51 These ideas about feminism are also articulated in “Against the Logic of Submission.”

52 In fact, it seems unlikely that Landstreicher believes that patriarchy exists at all. Throughout

Describing an event he attended in which men were asked to consider the amount of space they took up in the discussion, he writes: "There were workshops where certain *individuals* did dominate the discussions, but a person who is acting from the strength of their individuality will deal with such a situation by immediately confronting it as it occurs and will deal with the people involved as *individuals*."⁵³ Landstreicher's argument here is mostly that an attention to social position cultivates weakness and must therefore be rejected in favour of willful self-assertion as a practice of revolt. His analysis precludes the possibility that attending to issues of social position could make rebellion more broadly possible. This is one of the limitations of his individualist framework, in which a capacity for revolt becomes something that can only be nurtured as a set of individual personality traits and desires built in isolation, rather than a collective capacity that necessarily includes reformulating the ways we relate to each other.

Landstreicher's claims regarding which subjects might access their

rebellious individualities at all is also irrevocably gendered. In "Against the Logic of Submission" he claims that "Women who have been strong, rebellious individuals have been so precisely because they have moved beyond their femininity."⁵⁴ There is an easy slippage here between Nietzsche's claim that women, intrinsically weak, lesser-willed creatures that they are, will pollute the aristocratic pursuit of self-mastery and Landstreicher's claim that not only women's liberation but in fact *feminine subjectivity itself* constitutes an obstacle to the proliferation of strong and rebellious individuals.⁵⁵

My point here is not a reactionary embrace of weakness as a positive value or even a valorization of femininity as such (whatever that means), but rather to call into question the gendered weight of a derision for weakness. We should not ignore the long standing association between feminized subjects (along with their perceived attributes) and the reviled figure of the weak, snivelling victim that crops up in both Nietzsche and Landstreicher. At the heart of this equation is an appeal to the primacy of the cultivation of individual personality traits as the necessary trajectory out of oppressive social relations. For Nietzsche we must

the majority of his body of work, he refuses to gloss any sort of analysis of gendered power, even in his discussion of topics where its absence makes meaningful analysis laughable. (e.g. When he discusses sexual relationships as mediated by the commodity form in "On Sexual Poverty"). Instead Landstreicher most consistently seems to propose a wishy washy "gender is bad for everyone, and we're all having shitty transactional sex" position, with no attention to how power might mediate these experiences along gendered lines.

See:

Wolff Landstreicher "On Sexual Poverty" in *Willful Disobedience*, (San Francisco Bay Area: Ardent Press, 2009), 270–277.

⁵⁴ Landstreicher, "Against," 115.

⁵⁵ This isn't to say that Nietzsche's 19th century biological determinism is interchangeable with Landstreicher's proposal that women might be comrades—if only they could get over their femininity. To be sure, Landstreicher is writing in a context where gender is much more fluid and describing a situation in which individuals might change how they relate to gendered traits. Instead, I mean to underline the continuum that exists between these positions: the shared associations, and simplistic explanations in which femininity is a definite quality which signals weakness and futility.

⁵³ Faun, "Ideology."

reject the feminizing forces of care and equality in order to produce strong and willful masculine subjects. Landstreicher reminds us that if only we could all find our rebellious individualities we might overcome the (self-inflicted) yoke of patriarchy.

Weakness, however, is neither an inherent attribute nor an intentionally cultivated personality trait. It is a social circumstance reproduced by relations of power. Just as it makes little sense to embrace its revolutionary potential, vehemently espousing our disgust for it will not banish it from our lives. In doing so we only risk reproducing tired tropes that move us no closer to revolt. Overcoming weakness is not a neoliberal project of self-making, but a collective task of building resilient social relations and demolishing the structures that reproduce our vulnerabilities. Attending to weakness is thus fundamentally a social activity, one that must entail responsibility to those with whom we share this project (in the broadest possible sense) and, in contravention of Nietzsche's anti-moral dictum, must include practices of care and sympathy, along with a rejection of dominating power.

Nietzsche & Other Hated Social Elements

The relationship of Nietzsche's writing to historic Nazism along with his claims regarding the nature of Jews have long been a source of contention amongst those who have engaged with Nietzsche's writings and ideas. The clearest answer I can muster to this problem is as follows: Nietzsche himself was not, politically speaking, an anti-semite, but nonetheless exhibits a clear prejudice towards Jews.

That is, Nietzsche explicitly rebukes political anti-semitism and rejects the political positions embraced by self-identifying anti-semites of his time. He rejects the notion that Jews are, in actuality, conspiring to control the world, or that there should be state interventions to end Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe into Germany.⁵⁶ That said, lengthy and key passages of *Genealogy of Morality* (in particular) make Nietzsche's distaste for Jews abundantly clear. Nietzsche's argument here is essentially *that those sneaky Jews have obtained hegemony over Europe with their weak, snivelling, powerless, hateful, degenerate morality by smuggling it in through Christianity*. He makes numerous references to the "seduction of Jewish values" and the "calculated revenge of the Jewish people," whom he terms both "anti-nature" and a "priestly people of *ressentiment* par excellence, in whom dwell a popular moral genius without parallel."⁵⁷ Further, central to Nietzsche's objections to Christianity is an understanding that

56 Robert C. Holub, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem: Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2015), 128.

Holub's book provides a thorough and even-handed assessment of Nietzsche's views on Jews on Judaism and the historical, personal, and scholarly contexts of his remarks thereupon. I would encourage those seeking further discussion of these matters to consult it. Of particular interest are Holub's reflections that Nietzsche's often cited rebukes of anti-semitism reflect neither a rejection of its racist logic or any particular attitudes of tolerance or affection towards Jewish people. Rather, Holub takes these remarks as both the product of certain interpersonal conflicts and an assessment of political anti-semitism as merely another articulation of morality (131–133).

57 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 16.

Christianity merely constitutes Jewish values in disguise.⁵⁸ In one instance Nietzsche claims that the Church is in fact an “ecumenical synagogue” and decries the practice of worshipping Jesus as “bowing one’s head before Jews.”⁵⁹ Here, we see that Nietzsche’s concern is not only the Jewishness of Christian values but that the material culture itself of Christianity is secretly Jewish.

While we should be careful to differentiate the imaginary Jews of Nietzsche’s ahistorical genealogy from living Jewish people as Nietzsche would have understood them, his views become especially concerning when taken in tandem with the racist and eugenical undertones of a number of his claims. In *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche blames democracy, socialism, and anarchism on the genetic dominance of “pre-aryan” people, claiming that an “inclination towards the commune, the most primitive form of society” constitutes atavism, an evolutionary throwback.⁶⁰ One of Nietzsche’s recurring concerns seems to be that the “victory of common people” will result in “blood poisoning” due to the mixing of the races and classes.⁶¹ He proclaims in terror that “everything is jewifying or christifying, or mobifying as we watch.”⁶² In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche blames do-gooder Christians for the “deterioration of the European race.”⁶³

58 This is also a common trope among pagan and anti-christian strains of fascism.

59 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 31.

60 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 14.

61 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 18.

62 Nietzsche, *Ibid.*

63 Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 95-96.

It should be understood here that underlying Nietzsche’s critiques of both morality and any sort of impulse towards the commune is a claim that each of these pollutes the “purity” of European bloodlines and exemplifies Jewish subterfuge and crypto-hegemony. This said, these are generally not logics reproduced by anarchists who look to Nietzschean critiques of morality. Most of these anarchists either ignore Nietzsche’s claims of this nature outright, or refocus on the critique of Christianity in particular, absenting the anti-Jewish sentiments in the process.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, an attention to these aspects of Nietzsche’s thought remains important. In part, this is because it is in fact quite easy, in reading Nietzsche, to see the appeal of his writing to fascists, even more so when considering his overt authoritarianism. If anarchists are to engage meaningfully with Nietzschean ideas, we will do ourselves no favours by skirting their more distasteful implications.

Meanwhile, Nietzsche’s claims regarding the infiltration of Jewish values via Christianity, along with his appeals to notions of racial blood purity resonate strongly with certain contemporary strains of anti-christian, anti-state fascism. For example, we might consider the tenets of the neo-fascist group Wolves of Vinland, and its spinoff recruitment arm, Operation Werewolf, to see this resonance in practice. These groups propose a break with the “globalist,” “capitalist” (read: Jewish) order of modernity through

64 This is the approach that Shahin takes in *Nietzsche and Anarchy*, which does not make a single mention of Jews, even in its exegesis of “slave morality.”

See:

Shahin, *Nietzsche and Anarchy*, (Elephant Editions and Ardent Press, 2016).

the valorization of a new masculinity based in strength, self-mastery and some sort of mythic connection to European ancestors, along with an embrace of a naturalized, dominating violence. On its official site Operation Werewolf describes its membership as follows: “The warriors who make up operation werewolf know that true heroes are those who are self-made, physically and mentally strong, free-thinkers and free-doers who are both untamed and unrepentant.”⁶⁵ While their ideology draws on an eclectic amalgam of third wave esoteric fascists (Julius Evola in particular), it’s worth noting that their ideologues have also explicitly taken up Nietzsche’s ideas about morality.⁶⁶ Regarding the relationship between masculinity and morality, Wolves of Vinland figure-head, Jack Donovan, writes:

*In The Way of Men, I made a point to present masculinity “amorally,” because most people think of morality in civilized, quasi-Judeo-Christian terms that incorporate aspects of guilt and asceticism that Nietzsche would have associated with resentment—the priestly, inverted values of the meek and jealous. What these studies reveal about men is what Nietzsche would have called a “master morality.” For the “master,” that which is good is first of all that which wins and the rest can be sorted out later. It is the “right” of the mighty.*⁶⁷

We should note here the easy dovetailing

of a fascist reading of Nietzsche with Nietzschean claims about gender and masculinity.

In short, the far right, racist, authoritarian reading of Nietzschean sovereignty is not only *possible* but has very real echoes in current counter-hegemonic political tendencies that are actively gaining ground. When we consider recently documented cases of the slippage between anti-modern, anti-civilizational anarchist currents and esoteric, autonomous fascism it should be clear that we should exercise caution in our uptake of such ideas.⁶⁸ It is not that any ideas that have been appropriated by fascists should be off-limits to anarchist thought, but that if fascists have adopted particular ideas *because these ideas closely resemble fascist ideas* we should think carefully about what such ideas offer us as anarchists. In this context, salvaging anything of value from Nietzsche’s account

68 I am thinking here in particular of the case of Sadie and Exile, former ELF prisoners who were discovered to have become Evola-inspired neo-fascists in the years following their release. Some years earlier, another Green Scare prisoner, Christopher ‘Dirt’ McIntosh, was revealed to have become an avowed white supremacist in prison.

See:

“A Field Guide to Straw Men: Sadie and Exile, Esoteric Fascism, and Olympia’s Little White Lies,” *Anarchist News*, last modified February 22, 2016, <https://anarchistnews.org/content/field-guide-straw-men-sadie-and-exile-esoteric-fascism-and-olympias-little-white-lies>

“Former ELF/Green Scare Prisoner “Exile” Now a Fascist,” *NYC Antifa*, last modified August 5, 2014, <https://nycantifa.wordpress.com/2014/08/05/exile-is-a-fascist/>.

NYC ABCF, “ELF Withdraws Support for Christopher ‘Dirt’ McIntosh,” *The New York City Independent Media Center*, last modified February 18, 2008, <https://nyc.indymedia.org/en/2008/02/94825.html>.

65 “What is Operation Werewolf,” Operation Werewolf, 2017, <https://www.operationwerewolf.com/>.

66 Evola himself also drew heavily on Nietzsche.

67 Jack Donovan, “Masculinity and Master Morality,” Counter Currents, last modified June 26, 2012, <https://www.counter-currents.com/2012/06/masculinity-and-master-morality/>.

of morality would require, at the very least, a rigorous and honest engagement with his positions on Jews and race.

Anarchism as an Ethical Claim

Unlike other revolutionary political tendencies, anarchism generally does not posit itself as either a historic inevitability or the most efficient way to organize society. The strength of our political claims have always been ethical, not tactical. Anarchism is an objection to how the world is ordered and the forms of relations engendered by this order. Equally, it is an appeal to the possibility that the order of relations around us not only *could* look some other way, but *should* look some other way. Against those anarchists who propose that the claim of anarchy is merely the claim of individual desire, I maintain that our revolutionary imaginary necessarily encompasses something more. We might hate how this horrible world makes us feel as individuals, but we also hate the forms of social organization that ensnare those close to and far from us, that proliferate across the lives of all those with whom we share some form of relation. We don't just want to evade domination ourselves, but to end it as a generalized condition, because we think, fundamentally, that relations of domination are wrong. We should understand anarchism itself as (among other things) an ethical claim upon the world.

So what does it mean to begin to imagine an anarchist approach to ethics? It should be unsurprising that I have no definitive answers, no claims to a coherent moral system that we can insert neatly into our practices of struggle. Such a treatise would likely find itself in direct contradiction with both an ethical anarchist

project and an anarchist project of ethics. The goal is not to produce a series of prescriptive rules, but rather to sketch out directions, considerations and resources for ethical practice. To do so we will need to abandon the dogma of Nietzschean anti-morality and the fantasy that a revolutionary practice can be imagined without ethics.

Interdependence as the Basis of Ethics

Despite the inherent difficulties that anarchists encounter when we attempt to adopt ethical frameworks, the problem of ethics remains unavoidable. Even those anarchists who propose that the best way to live is an individualist pursuit of particular fancies and that no moral claims should circumscribe this actualization of desire are proposing an ethics. That is to say, it is impossible to make claims about how we should live without appealing to some sort of system of valuation, even if the claim is that the best way to live is to abandon any valuative claims about how we should live. Further, experience shows us that even the most avowed anti-moralists tend to determine their practices of interaction via some sort of ethical sensibility of how one should treat others. Whether or not these principles conform to historic moral systems, subcultural norms, or something else entirely, does not change that social relations are generally underpinned by ethical considerations. In fact, I have yet to encounter a comrade who, in discussing how I have conducted my interpersonal life, has thrown up their hands and found themselves incapable of weighing in due to the general falsity of moral claims. The incapacity of even the most committed

anti-moralists to escape the claims of ethics might largely be attributed to the inherent relationality that underpins our lives. We are always negotiating how to relate to others and there is thus no way out of relations that demand ethical attention.

Unsurprisingly then, anarchist refusals of morality are often enabled by a rejection of an understanding of the world that sees our lives and subjectivities as fundamentally enmeshed in and constituted by those of others. Examining Shahin's account of social relations might help us see the Nietzschean lineage of such claims. While Shahin's Nietzschean anarchism tries to break with some of the more unsavoury elements of Nietzsche's philosophy, the anti-moral logic that grounds their analysis remains classically Nietzschean. This is most apparent in Shahin's account of relationality. Just as Nietzsche champions a 'Sovereign Individual' who might form relationships with other sovereigns only through promise-making, Shahin proposes contingent relationships between "individualities" that last only so long as they remain joyful and mutually beneficial. Otherwise, they assert, "we risk binding ourselves together with conventional joyless attachments."⁶⁹ Like Nietzsche, Shahin eschews a notion of inherent responsibility between subjects, and just as possessing the right aristocratic nature allows Nietzsche's 'Sovereign Individuals' to agree upon temporary responsibilities, sharing coinciding desires allows Shahin's "individualities" to form temporary attachments of "love and trust."⁷⁰ Finally, just as Nietzsche locates valuation in triumphant self-affirmation,

Shahin espouses the ultimate value of individual desire, rejecting any valuation that relies on the relationality of subjects.

And yet, our lives are inextricably interdependent, and these relations of interdependence necessarily generate responsibilities to those around us. We cannot live without others, and we cannot negotiate our shared lives without considering how we affect each other, and how we are responsible to each other. This isn't an appeal to be kinder, or an assertion that struggle should relocate itself to an interpersonal sphere of micro-dynamics, but a real and practical concern about how we struggle. Struggle begets ethical questions, not just, "what should we do tactically, to succeed," but also "what should we do, morally speaking," and even "how will we know what success looks like?" We aren't some sort of hyper-rational *homo economicus* pursuing our discrete trajectories of self-interest, attaching ourselves to others only when it is clearly beneficial. We arrive in the world already entangled in each other's lives, in ways that sustain us, but also in ways that enable devastating forms of harm. Our very subjectivities—that is to say how we know and experience ourselves, how we compose ourselves as individuals—are born of these messy relations and are fundamentally co-constituting. Meanwhile, capitalism offers us the illusion of a subject that can reproduce itself in isolation and attacks the social relationships that might undermine this siloed existence.

The current social order at once breaks down the essential forms of interdependence that sustain us and produces an invisibilized web of dependencies maintained through coercion and violence. On the one hand we have entrenched alienation, isolation and the mass destruction

⁶⁹ Shahin, 194.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

of life-forms on this planet; on the other, lives inevitably sustained by the forcible extraction of resources and value from the beings around us. But ideologies that proffer a freedom that is merely freedom *from* our relations to others offer us no way out of our current predicament. Caught up in this network of interdependence we find ourselves responsible not only to our closest comrades but to people we'll never even meet. In imagining possibilities of struggle we need to consider to whom we are responsible and how. Even if all the choices seem terrible, we still need ethics. If there is no possible exit from the ways in which we constitute each other, then, like it or not, there is no way out of the network of ethical responsibilities.

Coercion & Sociality

The coercive potential of morality is a frequently cited concern in anarchist critiques thereof, and it is indeed a difficulty to which anarchists should be particularly attentive. However, how we should understand the weight of this changes significantly depending on what is meant by coercion. The claim that morality is inherently coercive might be best elucidated as three related but ultimately different positions, each requiring particular responses. The first position points to how institutions of social control have so often appealed to morality as the justificatory apparatus of their most despotic practices. But, such a critique doesn't necessarily require that we junk morality in its entirety, so much as it points to the need for rigorous engagement with the contents of moral systems and claims. The second position is a related but perhaps more nuanced take on the coercive potential of unquestioned norms, which

looks not only to those instances when moral rules are maintained via armed force (e.g. in a court) but also their more subterranean modes of reproduction, in which social norms produce the same relations that are elsewhere maintained by force. An anarchist understanding of authority as something that is reproduced not only by formal institutions, but also within the complex social fabric of our shared lives should encourage us to be particularly attentive to this concern. The final position is that all relationships that in some way limit the total actualization of individual desires are inherently coercive. This claim is frequently reproduced by individualist anarchists who have looked to Nietzsche for a critique of morality, and it is this third claim that I think must be rebutted if we are to undertake any sort of meaningful project of ethics.

We see this last claim at work when Shahin argues that morality represents an authoritarian relational axis between the community and the individual, which plays out via the violent enforcement of norms.⁷¹ This assessment echoes both Nietzsche's account of morality as a breeder of weakness and his position that obligations between individuals and collectivities necessarily constitute relations of domination. Through their affirmation of a Nietzschean "self-creating individual," Shahin concludes that collectivity holds value only inasmuch as it propels the individual forward: if our relationships to others hold back our individual projects we must "change the nature of the relationship, or maybe end it all together."⁷²

Shahin's claims here come directly

71 Ibid., 53–54.

72 Ibid., 102.

from Nietzsche's framework for understanding the general condition of social relations. This aspect of Nietzsche is perhaps more pernicious than his commonly rejected avowal of domination. Nietzsche's outlook is fundamentally anti-social and he decries community as "hostile to life."⁷³ Nietzsche does not see the relationships between subjects as intrinsic or fundamentally constitutive but rather as an axis of domination between two discrete and largely abstract entities: the 'community' and the 'individual'. This refusal to account for the myriad of complex and sometimes contradictory ways we are not only already bound up in each others' lives, but also fundamentally constituted by these relations, allows Nietzsche to elide any meaningful account of ethical obligation to the other. Nietzsche affirms an individual cut off from reciprocal relations of accountability; in his account, these relations only exist in as much as the 'Sovereign Individual' might choose to will them and are not inherently part of the fabric of our being. This is perhaps the most concerning aspect of the Nietzschean logic that has been embraced by anarchists seeking to formulate anti-moral claims: that the only conceivable relations between collective social formations and the individual is one in which this individual is subject to domination at

the hands of community or society.

Novatore, Shahin, and Landstreicher have all embraced frameworks that deny any sort of inherent intersubjective responsibility. The logic here is that: relationality that is not consciously chosen necessarily curtails the ability of the individual to enact its will and therefore constitutes a form of domination. The antidote varies somewhat depending on who you read but most formulations share certain underlying theses. Namely, that the primary liberatory force is the actualization of the will or desires of a discrete subject, and, following this, that our relations to others should be consciously chosen and fully contingent on their ability to fulfill this actualization. Any notion of responsibility here ends up looking starkly contractarian: we are responsible to others when we, as sovereigns, mutually agree upon our responsibilities. The basis for this agreement should be an evaluation of the extent to which our entry into such agreement moves us towards the fulfillment of our will, desires, or self-making project. If our chosen relationships fail to sustain this obligation they should be abandoned and we will once again be free from their claims. Not only does such an account of human relationships reside firmly in the realm of the fantastic, it should also cause us to question claims that Nietzschean individualism provides any path out of the "liberal dogma" of the social contract.⁷⁴ Nietzsche might indeed question the dominant contractarian account of social organization, however in its place he merely proposes a different model for contractual social relationships. To overcome the contract's gravitational pull we will invariably need to question the

73 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 52.

While some might attempt to make an individualist anarchist reading of this sentiment in Nietzsche, one in which the primary power relation is that between the community and the individual, that is: the community's constraint of the individual's Will to Power is governmental, authoritarian and punitive, it is my contention that such an approach requires a partial and somewhat obfuscatory reading of the source material.

74 Shahin, 117.

presumption of the coherent and discrete individual itself.

This reflection also moves us closer to responding to another frequently cited attack on ethics: the belief that ethical claims impose constraints and that this is a problem. This includes Wolfi Landstreicher's concerns about tactical restrictions, as well as the idea that any restriction on the ability of individuals to actualize their desires is somehow authoritarian.⁷⁵ What feels important here is a re-articulation of the relationship between coercion and sociality. Social relationships necessarily require us to negotiate the limits of our desires. However, we don't have to understand this as primarily constrictive. Such negotiations are also the basis of a collective project of freedom, one that expands the possible range of our desires themselves and also leaves us the space to make claims about how we should treat each other. The task of ethics in this model is not primarily to constrain action as a series of "don'ts" and "shouldn'ts" but to serve as a nuanced framework for evaluating relational decisions.

On Joy & Desire

Here it is worth looking more carefully at another popular claim against ethics as a resource for anarchist action. One of the forms this argument takes is the contention that we can replace moral knowledge with libidinal knowledge, in other words: we can stop asking what we

should do if we start asking what we *want* to do. We might consider, for instance, Shahin's proposal that anarchist struggle begins with desire, particularly individual desires "to live joyfully, and to live freely" and "to live free from domination, not to be ruled."⁷⁶ In this conception, anarchy is formulated as the manifestation of anarchic desires that spread through contagion.⁷⁷ This appeal to desire allows Shahin to sidestep the question of ethics. They write: "I don't say that my values and desires are the right or true ones," and, "I don't say that it is right or true to love anarchy and hate domination."⁷⁸ Shahin asserts "there is no universal standard for assessing values," seemingly concluding that any truth claim is inherently authoritarian.⁷⁹ According to Shahin, we have no need for a framework through which to evaluate our desires beyond individual gratification. If we want to share struggle with others the only way forward is to find those who already share our desires or to spread our desires through "seduction, incitement and contagion."⁸⁰

The affirmation of desire as an essential component of struggle has often proven a necessary antidote to approaches to struggle that render us self-effacing functionaries and neglect anything we might want or need for ourselves. However, taken alone, this consideration offers us very little in terms of determining how to struggle. Our desires are complicated and very often contradictory. They are shaped

⁷⁵ For Landstreicher's concern, See: Wolfi Landstreicher, "Barbaric Thoughts: On a Revolutionary Critique of Civilization," (The Anarchist Library, 2010), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/wolfi-landstreicher-barbaric-thoughts-on-a-revolutionary-critique-of-civilization>.

⁷⁶ Shahin, 103.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 114, 125.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 198–200.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

by all sorts of forces beyond our control, including all of the forces of domination that we hate and seek to abolish. This means that sometimes our desires are even deeply reactionary and simply following them would lead us somewhere very far from anarchy. Further, desire itself is not fixed. Desires are always contingent and ever-changing; even knowing definitively what we desire can prove challenging.

We find ourselves stuck with three bad options. In the first, anarchy merely means following our desires no matter what they are. If this is actually how we understand anarchy, then we might conclude that some man's desire to beat up his partner constitutes a valid expression of anarchist practice because he is simply following his individual desires. Any contention that patriarchal violence is *wrong* would constitute an authoritarian and punitive limit on said anarchist man as a desiring subject. Because (I hope) most anarchists would at least theoretically reject the above logic, we are moved to a second option: that we should all follow our desires *except* when they are the *wrong kinds of desires*. This of course requires us to determine which desires should be followed and which ones should be discounted.⁸¹ A third possibility is that anarchist struggle is in fact only for those people who harbour the correct desires. Not only does such a position make no sense if we are serious about changing our circumstances at a revolutionary scale, but we must again contend with the valuative problem of determining which desires are correct.

We should also note that desire doesn't get us out of the oft-cited conundrum of

"doing bad things for anarchy."⁸² While certain acts that have been deemed "bad" by conventional social mores might lend themselves more easily to re-articulation as desirable and thrilling forms of rebellion (think of bank robberies for example), such imaginaries rarely deal meaningfully with their complex ethical components. There are those who are determined to imagine their embrace of such acts as testaments to their anti-social immorality, but in reality we're mostly changing the terms on which certain acts are defined as good and bad. In the case of bank robbery for example, this might mean redefining the moral weight of private property and perhaps even the lives of those employed to defend it, but it doesn't necessarily constitute a break with moral valuation itself. Unless our aims are genuinely to cultivate narcissism, sadism, and a lack of empathy amongst anarchists, we can imagine that there are many scenarios of revolutionary struggle that fall outside of the rubric of desire, in which we do not desire any of the outcomes of a choice but must make a choice nonetheless. Just as struggle is bound to pose moral difficulties, struggling might also entail doing things we are reluctant to find desirable. Revolutionary violence in particular is a spectrum: some of it might invoke joy for a lot of us, but a lot of it will probably invoke joy for very few of us. This does not mean that we should embrace the false idol of pacifism, but it does not mean that we should strive to cultivate a sense of joy in brutality either.

I worry somewhat that I've reproduced the notion that pleasure is of little value, that things like joy and desire can only distract us from the serious work of

⁸¹ Such a negotiation of desires is the very stuff of ethics.

⁸² We might again think of Landstreicher's concern about tactical constraint here.

anarchist struggle. To be clear, I reject these positions. Desire can be a powerful force, and the proliferation of anarchist desires might well be an effective recruitment tactic.⁸³ But I doubt that this libidinal knot is enough to get us through the harder times. We can't just drop out when it stops being fun (and if we *can* we're probably doing something wrong). Further, relying on struggle alone to produce our joy is surely a dead end. We need things to defend, things to hold on to and fight for.

I find Sarah Ahmed's thoughts on happiness quite helpful here. In her reflections on ethics in the conclusion to *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed identifies what she terms the "affirmative turn" in ethics, a trend towards understanding ethics as fundamentally oriented towards producing good feelings. Ahmed asks us to consider the coercive possibilities of happiness as an ethical requirement, pointing to the demand for agreement such an ethics entails.⁸⁴ She writes: "If ethics is to preserve the freedom to disagree, then ethics cannot simply be *about* affirmation or *for* affirmation, understood as good encounters, as what increases the capacity for action."⁸⁵ Ahmed does not propose that unhappiness must be valorized as such, but rather that unwanted feelings are an essential ethical resource passed over by "affirmative ethics."⁸⁶ She insists that "ethics cannot be about moving beyond

pain toward happiness or joy without imposing new forms of suffering on those who do not or cannot move in this way."⁸⁷ Ahmed's ethical proposal offers us an interesting way out of the binary of joyless functionaries and joyful revolt. In this understanding, our feelings are neither obstacles to be overcome nor fetishized value markers of the success of our revolt. Instead, they are complex ethical *and* epistemic resources that might serve as multi-directional bases for action.

Care & Violence

If the anti-moral claims that have sought to free us from the grasp of juridical ethics have so often looked like a turn away from ethics, we should ask what other ethical tendencies have attempted to refute juridical ethics and if they might be resources for an anarchist practice of ethics. Feminist care ethics, for instance, have long sought to move away from a 'rights and rules' ethical framework dependent on a unitary subject, instead emphasizing the importance of deriving moral knowledge from relationships of care. Such accounts are interesting to us because they both emphasize relationality as the basis of subjectivity and offer a way out of liberal moral frameworks, notably juridical ethics. Care ethics might point to possibilities for anti-essentialism in anarchist ethical claims.

Yet, we should remain wary of universally affirmative takes on care. Care ethicists that move from moral to political claims tend to do so with an eye to shore up the institutions of social democracy, proposing that the state and its institutions might look to interpersonal care

⁸³ For a lengthier discussion of this approach, See: *Terror Incognita* (Crimethinc, 2012), https://cloudfront.crimethinc.com/pdfs/terror_incognita_reading.pdf.

⁸⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 212

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

relations in order to learn to better care for their citizens.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, as the text “For All We Care” so cogently puts it: “To endorse care as a universal good is to miss the role care also plays in perpetuating the worst aspects of the status quo. There’s no such thing as care in its pure form — care abstracted from daily life in capitalism and the struggles against it [...] There are forms of care that reproduce the existing order and its logic, and other forms of care that enable us to fight it.”⁸⁹ In other words, care itself is not inherently good or liberatory, and our treatment of it must be valiative and strategic.

Of recent writings on radical possibilities of care, one of the most interesting ones comes from Precarias a la Deriva, in the text “A Very Careful Strike.” Like many theorists of care, Precarias a la Deriva bases their analysis in a framework that centres interdependence. Their account envisions a web of non-static and multiple dependencies that are a “given among the inhabitants of this planet.”⁹⁰ However, while care is an “ethical element that mediates every relation,” Precarias a la Deriva is careful to differentiate their account of the ethical dimension of care from a fixation on individual care relations. They write:

*While that notion of the ethic of care places emphasis on the individual attitudes of those who care and think care as a transcendent value [...] for us the logic of care is transindividual and immanent, it does not depend on one but rather on many and is thus inseparable from the social, material, and concrete forms of organization of the tasks related to care.*⁹¹

In other words, if care relations might serve as a resource for ethical knowledge, they can only be properly understood in relation to their material and economic dimensions. Care is not just an affect but a material basis of social organization.

So what then of the ethical substance of care in anarchist struggle? Care itself has become a sticky topic among anarchists in recent years. Its discursive proliferation in our scenes and communities has at times seemed to entirely vacate it of meaning. Lately, everyone has some sort of claim on care: that their care is invisibilized, or essential, or exploited, or safe, or dangerous, or radical, or reactionary. To withdraw care as a radical gesture against its exploitation is to risk entrenching the forms of alienation that we are struggling against, but in proliferating it heedlessly we inevitably reproduce, through care, the very things we seek to destroy. We are left to determine for whom we should care and under what circumstances. I doubt that care alone can hold as the basis of an anarchist ethical practice, but it might point us towards those inevitable dependencies that require our attentions, and it offers a compelling way out of the logic of the contracting individual.

Care, like joy, gets complicated when we think about revolutionary violence.

88 Rosi Braidotti alludes to this in *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* when she discusses feminist care ethics’ orientation towards the production of “better citizens” and “moral agents.”

See:

Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2006), 119.

89 “For All We Care: Reconsidering Self-Care” in *Self as Other*, (Crimethinc, 2013), 5.

90 Precarias a la Deriva, “A Very Careful Strike: Four Hypotheses,” *The Commoner* 11 (Spring/Summer 2006): 40.

91 *Ibid.*, 44.

Revolutionary violence necessarily entails a retraction of care in certain directions, but it does not constitute a negation of care as such. The demands of care might even be the basis for such violence. Ethics that imagine care as a primarily affective relation, born of shared vulnerabilities, and proliferated exponentially, cannot sustain the complexity that a consideration of violence requires.⁹² This direction forecloses the ethical necessity of enacting harm, by demanding a particular affective response to violence. I propose here, that *how it will make us feel* cannot be the primary qualifier of ethical action.

Alongside all of the difficulties we encounter when we start to examine the interactions between care and violence, we find another common refrain against morality: the position that moral claims constitute an undesirable tactical limitation on anarchist struggle. At the heart of this claim is (hopefully) the knowledge that moral choices, particularly in situations of intensified struggle, are difficult and often contradictory, that we might not find easy answers to the question of “what *should* we do?” We understand intuitively, if not always experientially, that struggle might ultimately entail doing things that feel bad or even wrong and we attempt to resolve this by re-writing the

question of *should* as a merely tactical consideration.

Wofli Landstreicher touches on this position in “Barbaric Thoughts: On a Revolutionary Critique of Civilization,” when he writes:

Revolutionary critique also absolutely rejects moral critique. This may be the most important aspect in terms of argument. Revolution, in practice, amoral. Even if at times, in our struggle a few use the rhetoric of “justice” and “rights”, our revolutionary battle has nothing to do with justice or rights or any other value external to us. We want to overturn this reality not because it is unjust or evil or even “unfree” but because we want our lives back. Morality belongs to this social order. It has been used over and over again to keep us in our place—always backed up by the force of arms. Morality serves us for maintaining what is, because its final word is always constraint. Since we want to destroy what is, we must also destroy morality—especially that which exists within us—so that we can attack this society without constraint.⁹³

Here, Landstreicher attempts to sever the notion of revolution from the claim of morality. Towards this end he makes two key claims. The first is that revolution can only spring from values internal to us as individuals.⁹⁴ In this perspective, any claim of inherent responsibility to others is illegitimate. Morality must therefore be rejected as it attempts to evaluate the world using criteria other than the fulfillment

⁹² I’m thinking in particular of Judith Butler’s comments on grief and violence here, in which the ways in which we are physically vulnerable to each other demand not only ethical attention, but grief as ethical action.

See:

Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics” in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso, 2003)

Judith Butler. “Precarious Life, Grievable Life” in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009)

⁹³ Landstreicher, “Barbaric Thoughts,” secondary emphasis mine..

⁹⁴ We might also note here, the general fallacy of this position. Our subjective knowledge can never be so isolated. Values do not spring, unmediated, from some sort of platonic interiority, but rather are *necessarily* generated relationally..

of individual desires. The second, related claim is that morality is a force of constraint that denies us access to a full arsenal of weapons to use in our pursuit of revolution. Landstreicher's proposal reflects a number of Nietzschean perspectives on intersubjective responsibility. He wants to overcome the perceived constraining forces of inherent moral responsibility to others. He seeks to replace this mode of relationality with a triumphant affirmation of the strong and willful individual, who, shorn of responsibilities, might gain access to some sort of mythic pre-moral life force.

While I have already argued that such perspective on the ultimate centrality of the discrete individual is not only an impossible horizon, but a dangerous foreclosure of ethics, I want to examine more carefully the perceived *tactical* constraint of morality. Such concerns are often accompanied by the implicit assumption that an ethical practice of struggle will prohibit revolutionary violence. Related to this concern is often what seems to be a confusion between ethics and prefiguration. The worry is that if we embrace ethics as a logic for action we will find ourselves "allowed" only to do those things that prefigure the idealized social relationships of a utopic anarchist future. However, the history and practice of ethics (even beyond anarchism) has rarely been so facile; to speak of ethics is not an assertion that we can easily exit the contradictions this world has imposed on us. Instead, ethics should help us navigate these contradictions. Meanwhile, an ethics oriented towards revolutionary futures, one that, imbedded in responsibilities generated by our relations of care and interdependence, seeks to undo the world as it exists, will very likely find violence to be not only permissible but an ethical necessity.

Indeed, anarchists have been quite successful in refuting liberal pacifist claims that violence is never ethical nor tactical. But now that we know that we can be violent, what do we do? To whom do we direct our violence, and how, and under what circumstances? How do we distinguish between liberatory and authoritarian violence? Beginning to articulate answers to some of these questions is far from easy, but our answers therein will have to be (will necessarily be) informed by ethics as much as strategy or desire.

Towards an Anarchist Practice of Ethics

The anarcho-Nietzschean anti-moralists have often argued for an understanding of social relations that includes responsibilities to others only when they are "freely chosen" and serve the pursuit of individual desires. While I have argued that such an account of sociality ignores the fundamental interdependence that underpins our lives, we must also ask whether such a model gives us any meaningful tools for navigating the ethical questions we will inevitably encounter in the course of anarchist struggle. If our responsibilities include only those chosen comrades with whom we have agreed upon some form of mutual accountability, how will we know what (if anything) we owe the majority of other beings that fall outside this rubric? The answers offered by a Nietzschean position against morality has little to offer us in face of this quandary. At best ethics becomes a contrived practice of self-affirmation and a wholesale disavowal of the complex problems at hand. At worst, the proposed answer affirms a violent instinct for domination. Neither of these

positions has much of value to tell us about how we might formulate anarchist practices of relating.

If we foreclose the possibility of asking what the right thing to *do* is, ethically, we will inevitably find ourselves caught talking instead about what the right thing is to *feel*. If our only resource for knowing what to do is libidinal, if the possibility of anarchist action assumes that we must already be strong and wilful desiring subjects, then anarchism risks becoming nothing more than an individual project of self-betterment in which we overcome adversity vis a vis the cultivation of certain personality traits. If anarchism is to remain a collective project of freedom, if it is to pose any meaningful threat at all, we need more than a radical version of self-help.

I have argued throughout this text that we cannot opt out of ethics. The anarchist project is an essentially ethical one, and anarchist struggle, in its multiplicity of forms, will necessarily be forced to contend with ethical questions. This does not mean that I think the task of an anarchist project of ethics is to produce a conclusive series of moral dictums against which to evaluate our struggle. Instead, I propose that we are best served by identifying resources and questions that might help us navigate an ethical terrain. To this end, I have sketched out a series of proposals, drawing on the discussions throughout this text.

Any ethics must begin with an understanding that our relatedness is inextricable. That is, we are composed and reproduced relationally, and there is no meaningful exit from these relations. This is both the basis of ethical claims and the framework through which an ethic can be practiced. Ethics that require self-sufficient subjects, or that imagine that the interdependencies that underpin our lives

can be opted out of, have little to offer us.

We must also resist the urge to allow ethics to reside primarily in the space of individual moral practice. While ethics might certainly serve as a resource in determining how *I* should treat *you*, this cannot be the only, or even the primary task of ethics. A revolutionary ethics must attend to the structure of social relations in ways that are fundamentally transformative. At the same time, we must reject tendencies towards ethical abstraction. We are not seeking abstract rules divorced from the particular substances of our lives. Ethics matter precisely because they contend with the multiple and contradictory tensions that structure our experiences of living. Thus we must avoid reproducing the liberal project of ethical hypotheticals. Instead, we must prioritize ethical knowledge that is experiential and dwell in the specificities of the problems facing us.

Yet, while understanding ethics as a series of particulars might seem like an easy way out of the challenges posed by normative claims, we must also ask *if* our ethics need to be normative. Normative ethics ask what general criteria we should use to determine what we should do, morally speaking, and attempts to test these principles against applied scenarios. Contemporary anarchist subculture has probably absorbed enough ideas from French poststructuralism to find ourselves wary of such trajectories and their easy slippage into claims of universalism at best and chauvinism at worst. We know enough to know that our knowledge of situations requiring ethical attention will always be partial, that our claims to moral truth are tenuous at best. This said, we can't avoid the implicit normativity of many anarchist claims. We're building a political project that is rooted in some sense of *should*. Life

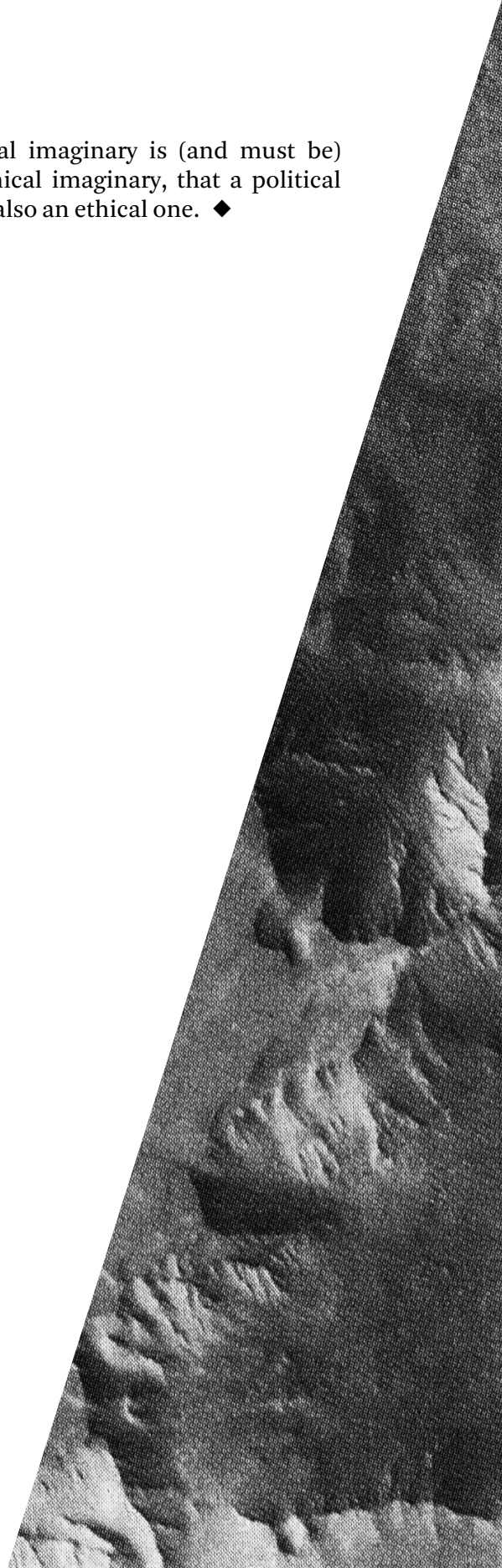
shouldn't be like this. Maybe life doesn't have to be like this. And if we want to know how to get from here to somewhere else, we'll need more than just critical theory; we'll need to stake claims about what should be done.

An anarchist approach to ethics must also strive to be fundamentally anti-authoritarian. We should be wary of essentialist and universalist claims. Proposals that obscure the particular challenges and contradictions of given ethical dilemmas dull both our analyses and our capacities for meaningful action. We must also be attentive to the coercive potential of our moral proposals and the ways in which power circulates through ethical relations. An ethics of power, an ethics against authority, must account for how claims of *should* are reproduced amidst networks of power relations. Despite this caution, we still need to leave ourselves room to think about this claim of *should* in a more global sense.

In order to determine our ethical practices we will need to contend with the why of ethical claims. This means both that we should reject the unquestioned claims of socially sanctioned morals and the notion that we can know what to do through intuition alone. Producing ethical knowledge will necessarily be a participatory and active process of construction.

Ultimately we must resist the distinction between ethics and politics. This is not a facile claim that the personal is political, but a call to push back against those forces that restrict the analysis of relational practices to the domain of individualized relationships. It is not so much that we wish to politicize the micro-dynamics of our lives but that ethical practice is expansive, that its claims surpass the limits of individualities. It is the notion that

our political imaginary is (and must be) also an ethical imaginary, that a political practice is also an ethical one. ♦



**An Attempt at
Interdependence
Storytelling /
Worldmaking**

An Attempt at Interdependence

Storytelling / Worldmaking

Things I was taught in school:

Species are self-contained. Evolution happens in isolation. Survival means survival of the fittest, and the most important interspecies interaction is predator—prey; kill or be killed. There is no interconnected web. We are not inherently changed by our interactions with others. Species are definable, clear. The classification system is based in Reason.

Boundaries are there, solid, firm at the edge of my skin. We are not physically attached to each other. You can leave and feel just fine. We can stand alone. “As if the entanglements of living [do] not matter.”¹ We can be separated from the things that keep us alive.

I am trying on new ideas.

When I’m feeling open to the world, I can feel how you’re feeling.

When I’m feeling open to the world and grounded in myself,

I can feel how I’m feeling and how you’re feeling and I know where to go.

Our bodies rely on the physical presence of other humans for regulation and steadiness. My immune system is not self regulating. “Human physiology is (at least in part) an open-loop arrangement, an individual does not direct all of [their]

own functions. A second person transmits regulatory information that can alter hormone levels, cardiovascular function, sleep rhythms, immune function, and more – inside the body of the first. The reciprocal process occurs simultaneously; the first person regulates the physiology of the second, even as [they themselves are] regulated. Neither is a functioning whole on [their] own.”² We are connected. The emotional parts of our brains evolved before capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Some parts of our emotions are older than the socio-political systems that shape how we express them.

There is a difference between a river and a seaway.

There is a seaway that connects my two homes. It was a river and they dug it deeper and now part of it is a seaway. The water flows. The lakes are growing more shallow. I follow the river from one home to the other. Stand outside of a bar, beer in hand, surrounded by three generations of the closest thing I’ll ever have to “my people.” The descendants of Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics who dug up their own roots, became settlers, and figured out how to benefit from colonialism and genocide.

The year the Titanic sunk, my great-grandmother turned 17 and got on a boat to cross the ocean. No one in my family can tell me why she immigrated. Maybe she was escaping poverty or seeking

1 Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5.

2 Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 85.

adventure — maybe both. The more I read about Irish people of her generation, the more I realize how far back the uprootedness goes. Capitalism has a long history.

*Prolonged separation affects more than feelings. A number of somatic parameters go haywire in despair. Because separation deranges the body, losing relationships can cause physical illness.*³

My great grandmother was sick by the time she made it across the ocean. She was sick and she still got papers, even when others didn't. She got papers and made choices to forget the poverty and the anti-colonial struggles back home. Her kids bought stolen land and assimilated.

She died before I was born and so, I have no memories of her. But her choices have shaped my life. How much agency do we have over the choices we make? How much can I hold her accountable for? What does holding her accountable even mean? Why did she support her husband when he was down at the mill protesting against Black people who wanted to join his union? Why did she support the politician who fought to keep her neighbourhood white? Why stay with him? Why stand with him?

There is a story I want to write about two cities and a river. It is populated by southern Irish and Sicilian diaspora. Its foundation is Haudenosaunee dispossession. Created by displacement and imperialism, these are places of empire building and genocide. Here the steel mills witnessed the Great Migration. Now their shells look over casinos. Once industrialized, now de-industrialized. Memories are held in dirt, as forget-me-nots and

mugwort plants flourish in abandoned factory yards. Memories are held in lung cells and broken down houses with white absentee landlords and counter tops that didn't stay clean until the mills closed. This is, and is not, my story.

Disturbances & Revolutions

*[A] disturbance is a change in environmental conditions that causes a pronounced change in an ecosystem... Deciding what counts as a disturbance is always a matter of point of view.*⁴

My friends have started playing with the word revolution again; not “the rev”, but revolutions and revolutionary change. We try it on to see how it feels. Words are hard, definitions are hard. Revolutions disturb the worlds that make up our lives. But, what counts as a disturbance? What is a pronounced change? When is that change something we want? What is the difference between change and harm? What are revolutions? Maybe there are only moments when things speed up and change happens faster. It is hard to find a strategy because the destination is unclear. What are our goals? Who are we, anyways? We search for new orientations, new possibilities.

*The idea of permanent conflictuality has become a joke or a trope. Maybe we should say permanent engagement. There still isn't a utopia or an end. It's going to look like constantly engaging with what's going on around us.*⁵ Not a utopia, but a direction, a horizon.

3 Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *General Theory*, 79–80.

4 Tsing, *Mushroom*, 160.

5 Conversation with IC, Fall 2017.

According to Stephanie Phillips, “the [Saint Lawrence] Seaway had been the long-standing dream of both Canada and the U.S. as a means of improving shipping on the St. Lawrence and of exploiting the river’s potential for hydroelectric power.”⁶ It was dug out to carry grains grown in the Midwest US to markets in Europe. “The need for cheap haulage of Quebec — Labrador iron ore was one of the arguments that finally swung the balance in favor of the seaway.”⁷ The Seaway as a hydro-electric power project, involved creating a dam that flooded about 49,000 acres of land.⁸ The project was finished in 1959.

This is a story about the Seaway. It is part of many overlapping stories. Stories of displacement, dispossession and disturbance. The story of the Seaway includes the story of the people in the community of Kahnawá:ke who had 1,262 acres of land stolen and whose access to the river was cut off when the Seaway was dug out.⁹ “The construction of the Seaway was an attack on the community’s land base and resources, its political autonomy, and its way of life.”¹⁰ Ahkwesáhsne had 130 acres of

land stolen.¹¹ In total, about 11,000 people were displaced by the Seaway. Humans, animals, and biological ecosystems were altered forever.

*This is an international story that crosses U.S.-Canadian lines; an inter-provincial story as it affected both Ontario and Quebec, and a story of the abrogation of long-standing treaties with the Mohawks of Akwesasne and Kahnawake. The story began late in the nineteenth century, heated up considerably throughout the early part of the twentieth, and became a defense imperative for both Canada and the U.S. during World War II. It is a story of political alignments and realignments, big business lobbies, grass-roots social protest, community loss, and environmental change in rewriting the landscape of the St. Lawrence River.*¹²

The story of the Seaway includes the stories of the canals that closed when it opened. It is the stories of the neighbourhoods around the closed canals that experienced economic shifts and population changes. It is the stories of the 22,000 people employed between 1954 and 1959 to work on “one of the largest civil engineering feats ever undertaken.”¹³ It is the stories of the 200 odd employees for the Seaway Corporation who almost went on strike in 2014 over proposed automation of

6 Stephanie Phillips, “The Kahnawake Mohawks and the St. Lawrence Seaway” (Masters thesis, McGill University, 2000), 20.

7 “Saint Lawrence Seaway”, Wikipedia, accessed March 18, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Lawrence_Seaway.

8 Rosemary O’Flaherty, “Damming the Remains: Traces of the Lost Seaway Communities” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2016), 4.

9 Phillips, “The Kahnawake Mohawks and the Saint Lawrence Seaway,” ii.

10 Ibid., 47.

11 Ibid., 2–3.

12 O’Flaherty, “Damming the Remains,” 26.

13 Roger Benedict and Pierre Camu, “Saint Lawrence River and Seaway” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saint-Lawrence-River>.

the lock system and fear that it would put them out of work completely.

The Seaway drastically changed the landscape between Montreal and Lake Erie. New canals were dug out, new locks installed. New islands made from the dug up river bed appeared. Whole villages ended up underwater. Called a great water highway, the Seaway is an infrastructure project that cost tens of billions of dollars. The Seaway both is and is not the river. You can't swim in the water. There are signs warning people to not get too close to the locks. You can't fish in the Seaway. "There are many unseen dangers in and around seaway channels."¹⁴

What kind of river will the Saint Lawrence become when the Seaway ceases to be profitable? What futures are possible in the deeper waters and new locks that run from the ocean all the way into the Great Lakes? This project has permanently altered a landscape and everything that moves through it. How can we find the "life promoting patches" that persist in the aftermath of a colonialist and capitalist project, a disturbance like the Seaway?¹⁵

There is a vacant lot in a city near the Seaway. A vacant lot in a "revitalizing post-industrial neighbourhood." Revitalized is the word for "there is capital moving through there again." The abandoned factories have become art studios and tech start ups and condos. This vacant lot persists. The lot is covered in mugwort plants. It's the summer of 2011 and there is

a crowd of people coming. You and I dart out in front of the crowd, carrying a big banner. We scurry up to a huge wooden advertisement for brand new condos and spend ten minutes trying to figure out how to drape the banner over the billboard. We succeed, only no one can read the banner because it won't hang cleanly, but no one can read the billboard anymore either—a small act against gentrification.

Two days later I go back to the lot. I bask in the sunshine and pick a few mugwort plants. The banner is still there, flapping on the front of the billboard. I head home to stuff the mugwort into jars filled with cheap vodka. To let them sit in my cupboard for the rest of the summer until they become tinctures. The banner stayed up for months.

Vulnerability & Interdependence

*The "bob-tailed" squid is known for its light organ, through which it mimics moonlight, hiding its shadow from predators. But juvenile squid do not develop this organ unless they come into contact with one particular species of bacteria, *Vibrio fischeri*. The squid are not born with these bacteria; they must encounter them in the seawater. Without them, the light organ never develops. But perhaps you think light organs are superfluous. Consider the parasitic wasp *Asobara tabida*. Females are completely unable to produce eggs without bacteria of the genus *Wolbachia*. Meanwhile, larvae of the Large Blue butterfly *Maculinea arion* are unable to survive without being taken in by an ant colony.*¹⁶

14 The St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation, "Tommy Trent's ABCs of the Seaway," http://www.greatlakes-seaway.com/en/pdf/tommy_trent_abc.pdf.

15 Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 108.

16 Tsing, *Mushroom*, 141–142.

Interdependence is a fact of our lives, but a fact that capitalism obscures through alienation and stories of self-containment. Interdependence is a web of messy necessities that humans, animals, and biological ecosystems build together. Interdependence isn't necessarily good or bad, it just is. Interdependence can be scary because it means we need others: other people, other animals, other plants, other ecosystems, and maybe other solar systems. Interdependence is a form of vulnerability. We cannot meet all of our needs on our own. Interdependence just is, but how we relate to it can change. How we navigate interdependence says a lot about our political maps.

Individualism & Anarchists Who Are Not Men

In the early heyday of anarchism, anarchism women, namely Emma Goldman and Voltarine De Cleyre, saw the individual as the base unit of society and understood the individual as the primary actor in resistance. They posited anarchism as a way for the individual to be at the center of social organization, as opposed to (both left wing and right wing) governments that promoted conformity and the "will of the majority." Emma and Voltarine also wrote about the roles delegated to women in society and the problems created by these roles.

In "What I Believe," Emma writes, "marriage, or the training thereto, prepares the woman for the life of a parasite, a dependent, helpless servant." A century later, women perform the majority of the caring and reproductive functions in society, even in countries that have embraced a certain flavour of feminism

and "equality" for white cis women.¹⁷ These social roles and tasks are still considered invisible, inferior, and are devalued.

People who are not men and not white, globally, experience the majority of the violence and exploitation meted out by the capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist system we live under. This violence does not affect people evenly. White supremacy means that many white cis women in the US and Canada have pushed much of the reproductive work that their mothers performed onto the backs of women of colour, so that they can succeed in their capitalist careers. They have done this by accessing wealth and government programs that bring migrant women to the US and Canada to take care of white children. They have done this by supporting the government, the military, and the prison industrial complex. They have paid their taxes and rallied for the state to fix the problems they face. Though my great grandmother was one of those migrant women, she was given a way out. The generations of women in my family since her have been complicit.

It is no surprise that even in this context where some white women in the US and Canada don't perform certain kinds of care and reproductive work, patriarchy still teaches us to assign care labor to women, cis and trans, regardless of (although differently, depending on) race and class. Growing up, I was often put in the role of paying attention to the emotions and needs of the people around me to the detriment of my own emotions and needs. Even as a white girl raised in this context, I knew that women were supposed to take care of others and suppress their boundaries

¹⁷ Reproductive in the larger sense, not just child-birth, though also that.

and desires, mostly in relation to men. Becoming an anarchist didn't change the gender role assigned to me, it simply made me more aware of it and gave me a drive to try to change the world that made (and makes) me.

Some anarchist women in my life have found reprieve from the gendered care imperative in tendencies of anarchism that are anti-communal and anti-collective, tendencies of anarchism that heavily emphasize the individual. The logic says, I just have to stop thinking so much about other people and I just have to stop doing all the dishes for my (male) roommates, and I will be free of the care imperative. I think Emma and Voltarine wouldn't disagree. If the individual is the primary actor in resistance, this perspective makes sense.

But, I can't change things on my own. Even if I kill the Man in my head, there will still be men in the world who will hand me a broom and vomit their emotions into my lap. If I succeed in avoiding certain kinds of care labour, it will likely be mostly because I am white and can access money and jobs that make the avoidance possible. This avoidance often comes at the expense of other women elsewhere in the world. The care labour doesn't go away. I just stop being the one doing it.

And so, I am skeptical. Embracing individualist anarchist tendencies involves opposing values like community, connection, and cooperation. It promotes self-containment and ignores the ways that we need others and they need us. It ignores the ways we are still interconnected. I don't want false individualism to be my only option to deal with patriarchy. Interdependence is too real to me. Individualism, even when its anarchist, cuts me off from other people who nourish

me and cuts me off from collectivities that sustain me.

*While we may not be able to eradicate the systems that imprison us immediately, we stand a far better chance if we don't get tricked into thinking our struggles or the solutions to them are individual. The more ways we find to act in honesty with each other, whether in sorrow or in excitement, the stronger and more resilient we become — individually and collectively.*¹⁸

Witches

Some anarchists have found respite from the care imperative through valorizing the social roles that are generally assigned to women, like care work and healing work. They tell us we need to heal ourselves from the systems that fuck us up, and a part of me buys it. Heal yourself so you can heal the world from all the things that are killing other people, killing other-than-human creatures and plants. Healing work is the revolution, they say. I'm drawn to it, but it feels like something is missing. What do we mean by care and healing? Who can do it? How?

Sometimes this too feels so individual. It tends to look like herbalism businesses and witchcraft-as-fad. It looks like psychotherapy and rhetoric about self-care. It looks like active listening workshops and making up rituals. None of those things are bad on their own. Some of it is even about creating some sort of culture, something not-just-individual, but it still feels

¹⁸ "Self-Care: Self as Other", Crimethinc, 2013, <https://crimethinc.com/2013/09/06/new-zine-about-self-care-self-as-other>.

like grasping at straws, especially when its white women doing it.

*Our experience is that often people want to rush to talking about magic, animal spirits, literally hearing words from trees, that sort of thing, while skipping over the long, hard work of getting to know their landbase on its own terms. Similar magical practices exist in various indigenous landbased traditions around the world, but for settlers (especially white settlers) living in the land called North America, we need to appreciate just how gone those traditions are for us. They are really really gone. There isn't an older, earth-based culture for settlers still clinging to existence on the margins of industrial society... There is nowhere for us to escape to when we realize the lives and worldviews we have been given are crap.*¹⁹

We went out east to support a struggle and one night our host made tea as we sat on the floor, prodding sore muscles and sharing stories. They asked what kind of tea we wanted. I was in the middle of writing this piece and they had mugwort tea so I asked for that. I woke up in the middle of the night with terrible cramps. Couldn't get back to sleep, worried about blood stains and ibuprofen availability. My period wasn't due for another day or two. I had forgotten that mugwort can induce bleeding. The plant has historically been used for liver disorders and as a digestive bitter, but it is also an emmenagogue. Try to slow down, I told myself, you don't know

¹⁹ "Interview with Knowing the Land is Resistance", *Black Seed*: Issue 4, Winter 2015, 11.

much, remember? Figure out who you are.

Mugwort likely came to the so-called Saint Lawrence region via Jesuit clergy who used it as food and as medicine. It has flourished there ever since. A sign of colonialism and the violent mixing of worlds it brought about, mugwort won't grow if you plant it. It takes root along roadways, in clearcuts and brownfields, in vacant lots, sucking up the nitrogen in the soil.²⁰

Mugwort's latin name is *Artemisia vulgaris*. The goddess Artemis, or Diana, is often depicted as a huntress with bows and arrows. We tell stories about the plants we see, connecting them to human histories, in part to remember their effects on us. Artemis, goddess of the hunt, supposedly a virgin, associated with a plant that is known for bringing back an absent period. Artemis has meant so many different things to so many different humans over so many centuries. A huge number of those stories are gone, or passed down in traces only intelligible through the systems of violence that structure our everyday lives.

What can we find in sifting through the stories? We are trying to find the rough edges of capitalism. We are trying to create forms of care against patriarchy. Teaching each other to slow down and listen, and sometimes to speed up and change.

*What does it mean to just stop care? That's a question. There are care strike questions.*²¹

On a physical level, a care strike is impossible. If we stop caring for others,

²⁰ Gina Badger and Dori Midnight, "In & Out of Time: An Interview with Dori Midnight", *No More Potlucks* 17: Magie (Sept/Oct 2011), <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/in-out-of-time-an-interview-with-dori-midnight/>.

²¹ Conversation with IC, Fall 2017.

we stop caring for ourselves. Care is a physiologic process. Care is my immune system regulating yours. But also, intentions matter. Intentional care is more than a physiologic process. Intentional care is both physiologically and strategically necessary. But care on its own is not enough. We also need to fight, but we cannot give up caring in the process. We need care and combativity!

An attempt at being for something while being embedded in many things.

*The combined effects of human activity over the millennia include the creation of extensively altered, highly cosmopolitan species assemblages on all landmasses.*²²

I want to foster chaotic decentralized decision-making. I want worlds where many different forms and ways of life can all exist at the same time. I want “a multiplicity of decision making spaces pervading all moments of life” that “allows different, even conflicting, decisions to be made at different points.”²³ It isn’t all about what I want. I am embedded in an entangled world in which “all organisms make ecological living spaces, altering earth, air, and water.”²⁴

Humility seems important here. “If

22 Nicole L. Boivin et al, “Ecological consequences of human niche construction: Examining long-term anthropogenic shaping of global species distributions.” *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 113, no. 23 (June 7, 2016): 6388-6396, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4988612>.

23 Peter Gelderloos, *Worshipping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation*, (Chico: AK Press, 2016), 20-21.

24 Tsing, *Mushroom*, 22.

survival always involves others, it is also necessarily subject to the indeterminacy of self and other transformations. We change through our collaborations both within and across species. The important stuff for life on earth happens in those transformations, not in the decision trees of self-contained individuals.”²⁵ We have so much figuring out to do. We can strategize without pretending to be making a blueprint for the world. We can have conviction in our beliefs, while staying grounded in our relationships.

Capitalism attempts to control our entire lives. It attempts to be totalizing, but it can’t. Capitalism tries to direct all of our relationships towards productivity and commodification, but it can’t. Capitalism makes us think that we are alone. Capitalism destroys the relationships we need to survive. In some moments, we can escape its grasp, but those moments can feel few and far between.

I keep thinking about the Irish Famine of the 1840s and 1850s, about how capitalism creates famines and colonialism creates death and destruction. My great-grandmother grew up knowing people who survived the famine. She grew up in a world so changed by the specter of the famine and followed a migration path intimately shaped by the fact of the famine. The story of the famine is intertwined with my story. We are shaped by processes that are so much bigger than ourselves and yet, we have a responsibility to act with integrity, to do what we can to understand and change our contexts.

We started organizing neighbourhood contingents for the annual anti-capitalist May Day demonstration when it was impossible to take the streets without the cops

25 Tsing, *Mushroom*, 29.

arresting everyone right away. We didn't believe in asking for permission, didn't believe in giving the police the route of our demo, and so they declared our demonstrations illegal and gave us all \$600 tickets. We didn't want to just walk into a kettle every time we took the streets, so we started casting around for another solution.

We met up once a week to strategize and make decisions collectively. We ate meals together. We talked and talked and talked. We settled on inviting all our friends to meet us in a park near the main demonstration. We would walk together in the streets and see what happened: no facebook, no listservs, and no cops. It worked, sort of. We had fifteen not-so-glamorous minutes together in the streets before we dispersed. We tried again a couple months later and managed to double our numbers with the same tactics.

Looking back, I want to find bigger and more shared goals, not as a precondition for planning together, but as part of the process. Not to unearth a fictitious unity, but to know our differences and work together anyways when it makes sense, instead of assuming that we all think the same things. I want more than protest movements, even while I find value in being in the streets together. I want the men in the group to stay after the meeting and talk through the tears and the emotions that came up in that collective organizing context, even when it's scary. I want those of us who are not men to step up to the front, masks up, and push the confrontation to another level, even when we're fucking terrified. I want struggle that is both more rooted in place and more expansive in solidarity. I want a clearer acknowledgement of our interdependence and a better understanding of our histories.

Questions of Scale

I think one of the big questions I've been trying to answer as an anarchist is 'what is the relationship between the personal/interpersonal and the "struggle" writ broadly?' What is this relationship, how does it work, is there even really a separation between the two?

In attempting to answer these questions, I have become confused about scale. I know I'm not the only one. "The ability to make one's research framework apply to greater scales, without changing the research questions, has become a hallmark of modern knowledge."²⁶ I've been trying to answer my question by only scaling up.

I was raised by a white second wave feminist. She didn't teach me that the personal was political, but feminism was the first "ism" I felt affinity with. I was assigned female at birth and while I don't necessarily feel excited about that, I've never felt driven to change my assigned gender or sex. I have been a tomboy since I was a kid and knew that my dad wanted a boy and not a girl, an understanding which strongly encouraged me to become a jock in order to bond with him. It helps that I was good at sports, but, for me, it also meant that traditional Western forms of femininity have always felt alien. However, even as a tomboy, I was raised as a girl in a patriarchal world and that world says that women focus on the interpersonal.

So, I have always been drawn (and pushed) towards conflict mediation, emotional support, and analyzing the complexities of interpersonal relationships. I have known for a long time that these skills are undervalued and

26 Tsing, *Mushroom*, 38.

underpaid, because they are seen as women's work. Twitter campaigns like *#giveyourmoneytowomen* are appealing. They make the argument (among others) that women are regularly doing unpaid emotional labour for men and thus, should be compensated for it.

However, I want to abolish work, not find more ways to commodify my coercively gendered skill-set. It took getting halfway through an application process for social work school for me to realize that going into an industry where the job is (supposedly) about emotional skills wasn't going to work for me. But I digress. It's not as if I'm not using those skills doing customer service.

I generally feel capable of reading and interpreting the interpersonal dynamics in my communities and processing my feelings about all of it. I have done material and emotional support for friends and folks in my communities over the years. I have facilitated accountability processes and meetings and mediated conflicts. I genuinely believe that if people in my communities all got better at these skills, bigger changes would become more possible. But it is hard to be clear that changing oneself isn't changing the world.

I keep trying to find a way to scale those skills up. To make them be the "struggle." And in the process I confuse changing myself with changing the world. Does this scale of change count as revolutionary? The reach feels so short. Interpersonal care as a skillset is important to me. Yet the kinds of revolutions that change many worlds all at once, and not just the one in my living room near the Seaway and the vacant lot that is no longer full of mugwort, I can't make those happen on my own. Changing myself, and my ecosystem of friends, doesn't make those happen.

Lately I've been feeling pretty insecure about how hard I find it to do "big picture political thinking." Some people around me have gotten really into thinking about strategy and trying to figure out how to do revolutionary strategy. I keep getting so lost. Holding on to "what's really happening in the world" is hard, keeping track of "what we need more of" writ broadly is tricky.

On the one hand, I want to fight my feelings by bolstering the political importance of the things I am good at. Telling the demons in my head that it's the fucking patriarchy that is teaching me that my lean towards the interpersonal, towards the community relationships, is less important than this "big picture thinking." Take that story and turn it into the idea that "relationships are the most important" and preach that, in order to make myself feel better. I find lines in books like, "because our minds seek one another through limbic resonance, because our physiologic rhythms answer to the call of limbic regulation, because we change one another's brains through limbic revision – what we do inside relationships matters more than any other aspect of human life" and try to use them to feel better.²⁷ I read all the blog posts and tweets about care and conflict resolution and the intricacies of accountability processes, about how to set good boundaries and how political that is, and I feel so conflicted.

I don't entirely buy the story. The one that says that the invisible, interpersonal work in our organizing is the most important, is the work. I know that it is often the least valued, but I don't think we should create a new hierarchy in order to combat that lack of value. Am I making a big deal out of nothing important? I feel

²⁷ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *General Theory*, 192.

like I have to pick a side, pick a problem. It depends on who I'm around, what my context is. I'm trying to only talk about myself, but if I'm understanding what interdependence actually is then my story isn't just about me. It's messier than that.

It's here that anarchist individualism and very interpersonally focused anti-oppression organizing converge. It feels to me like some strains of individualist anarchism that focus on the joy we feel in the attack and the innate drive individuals have to revolt, the strains that completely ignore the social worlds we live in, they're missing the point. And so are the fairly liberal forms of anti-oppression politics where the only avenues of political action are focusing on changing our inner worlds, and calling out fucked up interpersonal dynamics. In both cases, moving towards revolutionary horizons feels like a thing we stop talking about. In both cases, we focus only on the smaller scales and ignore the bigger ones.

It's here where I keep coming back to care and combativity. Bringing about the changes we want to see in this world isn't easy. The violence of this world already affects some people more than others. We need to step up our game at both taking care of each other and building a force to be reckoned with, a force that can take down the violent systems that structure our worlds. We need a multiplicity of approaches, happening at different scales, over different time frames.

Transformation through encounter²⁸

How are we always already changing each other? We transform the radical communities we inhabit (although its not a bubble) with the fucked up behavior

we learned living under patriarchal capitalist white supremacy (precisely because its not a bubble). We change ourselves in noticing how the people around us feel, the moments that can feel like obligations and restrictions on our freedom, but are actually the inescapable reality of our interdependent lives. We are porous people and porous communities; leaking, patchy, and overlapping.

*Love alters the structure of our brains.*²⁹

My emotions always come flooding back when I cross the river. Being in that city, I deaden my senses and numb my emotions, but they always come back. This both is and is not my life and the self-contained fantasies I inhabit in one city explode in the other. But the act of crossing brings me back into my body and the act of crossing together transforms the worlds so that they are no longer self-contained. They never were anyways. He feel my emotions coming back as we cross the bridge and puts his arm around my shoulders. "Because limbic states can leap between minds, feelings are contagious, while notions are not."³⁰ I like the weight but I feel conflicted about it. This trip left a weird taste in my mouth. My mom liked him too much and huge parts of me felt unseen. There are ways that being close with men transforms my relationships with the people in my life who are not men, transforms my relationship with myself, and not all transformations are leading us in liberatory directions.

We have made new annual traditions, finally, after years of living in a city that is

²⁸ Tsing, *Mushroom*, 28.

²⁹ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *General Theory*, 123.

³⁰ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *General Theory*, 64.

a second (or third or more) home for many of us. We start gathering in the fall, usually late in the fall, after the first snow. We spend our first meeting talking about how amazing it is that this project continues to exist in this form. We marvel at how meetings feel when we exclude cis men. Then we frantically, quickly, pull together the logistics needed to bring at least one hundred people out to the river on a major holiday to yell and wave across prison walls. Our plans are always more ambitious than our outcome, but, for years now, we have spent that holiday darting through snow, ice, and freezing river-wind, trying to outrun the cops in order to be near enough that people can see us from their barred windows. Fireworks shoot from our shaky fingers. Throats sore from singing and shouting. Blankets and banners and sometimes hot cocoa with marshmallows in tow. The highs and lows of my anxiety tempered by the cheers from now-almost-familiar faces behind bars, behind fences.

It always makes me think about my father. He loves forging collective traditions in a world that is so alienated. He is no feminist, but he taught me how to draw people together. Going to that bar, on that day, knowing he'll be there with his friends who are also his family, friends whose fathers were friends with his father. Following him there, wondering who is going to say something fucked up and whether I'll say anything back. Talking to his friends, who are more like my uncles, and we always talk about my other home. How long have you been there now? When are you going to move home? These days I have two homes.

Confrontation and conflict are missing from the stories about care.

We don't read care into the stories about confrontation and conflict. We don't read confrontation and conflict into the stories about care.

If we want to engage with confrontational demos, we must organize ourselves and relate to one another in ways that allow us to work through the trauma and fear that grow out of our encounters with the police. We must figure out what it looks like in practice to focus more on care, support, emotional openness, and reflexivity in our mobilization and organizing for confrontational demos... By organizing to support one another, we hope to provide a basis for more people to feel able to participate in confrontational demos, and more confidence for all of us to be combative in all the ways that we know are necessary.³¹

We need a wider range of tactics.

We need new strategies.

We need all the emotions.

That's why I get so angry at the colonized fantasies of so many white middle-class feminists, that we should simply wish ourselves back to those ancient non-violent matriarchies or non-conflictual communal bands. That using uzis or building a clandestine liberation culture is 'playing men's game', is 'using tools

31 "Dear comrades in the streets", a flier handed out at a demo against police on March 15, 2014 in Montreal.

of the patriarchy'.³²

I am searching for traditions that are not just about drinking and finding the people who are most like me.

Taking mugwort can cause lucid dreams.

Dream one: Mugwort grows in vacant lots in a "revitalized" post-industrial neighbourhood near the Seaway. Mugwort ripped up to make way for condos. We lose all hope and give up.

Dream two: Mugwort in vacant lots is ripped up to make way for condos. Neighbourhood residents resist. Light fancy cars on fire and smash windows. Band together to cook for each other and watch each other's kids. The fight is not over. The fight is not enough. The fight is perhaps a practicing stage for bigger fights to come. Fighting gentrification is not necessarily the same as fighting colonialism and capitalism.

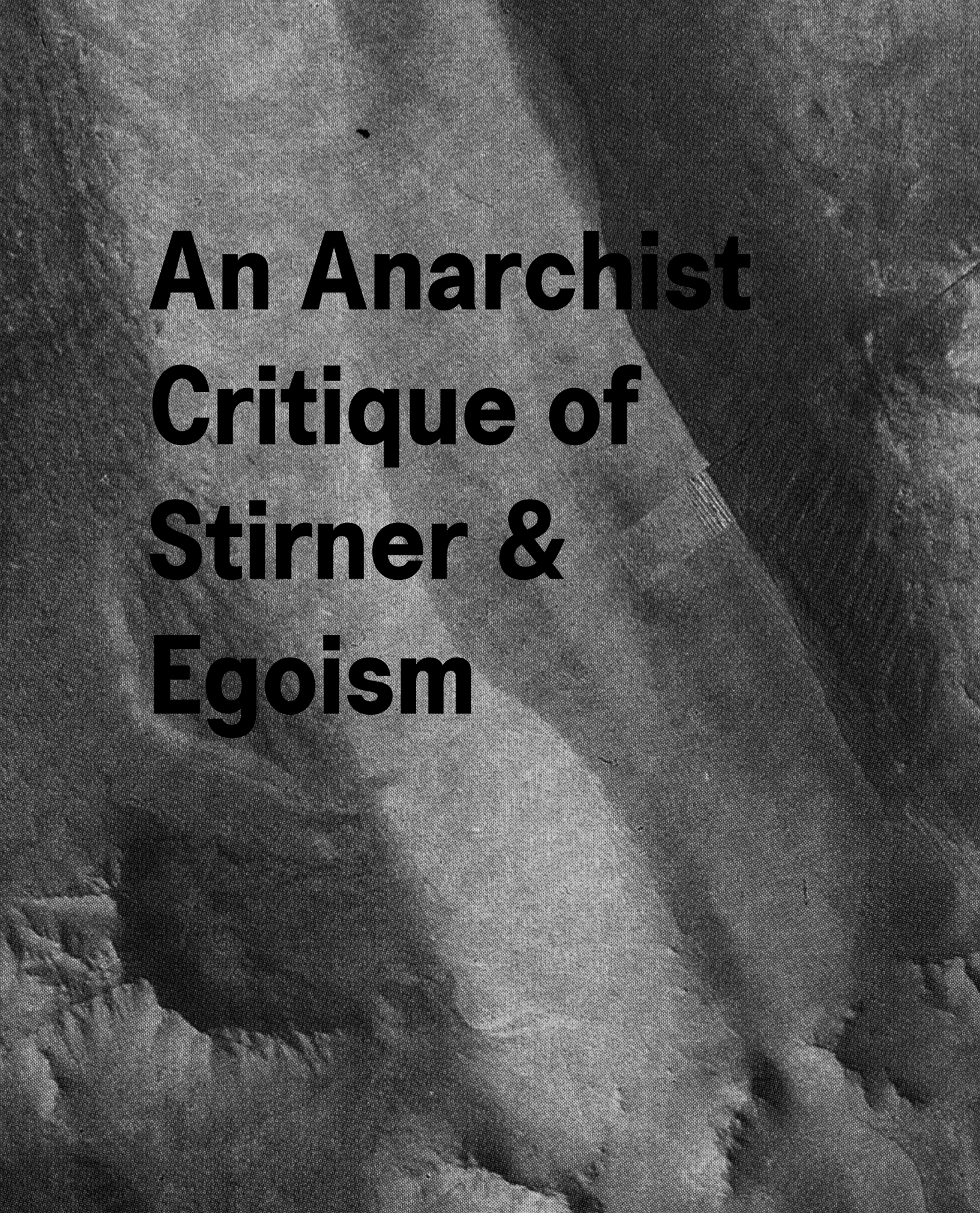
Dream three: Mugwort in vacant lots is ripped up to make way for condos. The mugwort pops up in the lawns of the condo-dwellers causing allergic reactions and hayfever. The mugwort makes it impossible to grow well manicured lawns. The condo-dwellers stop paying their mortgages and the housing bubble pops. Changes are happening fast. People start to squat empty condos in an effort to build an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal resistance struggle.

Dream four: We succeed in creating bad-ass revolutionary connected-worlds-crews of people who aren't cis men. Our self defense is a form of offense and we

treat it as such. We are building anti-colonial liberated spaces and moments in the patches where capitalism grows thin. We relate to our interdependence as a liberatory form of life that sustains our relationships and shapes our responsibilities. We are shifting and burning as needed. We are full of confrontation and care and discerning about the appropriate moments for both. The mugwort has come back to the neighbourhood. We drink tea, and smoke mugwort cigarettes and teach each other new skills. We stage our attacks and build something bigger. We are transforming ourselves in the process.

My actual life: harvesting mugwort from the vacant lots. Taking it as a tincture years later, when the mugwort fields are now condos. Trying to heal from a bad break up. Trying to figure out how not to focus so much of my life on automatically taking care of everyone all the time. Exploding the care imperative in order to find more space to think about revolutionary anarchism and revolutionary strategy but feeling guilty while doing it, not feeling smart enough. Not knowing where this leads me but finding comfort in knowing that I am not alone. I never was alone. ♦

³² Butch Lee, *The Military Strategy of Women and Children*, (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2003), 108.

A black and white photograph of a person's legs and feet, wearing socks and shoes, with the title text overlaid. The person is standing on a textured surface, possibly a rug or carpet. The text is in a bold, sans-serif font, arranged in four lines.

An Anarchist Critique of Stirner & Egoism

An Anarchist Critique of Stirner & Egoism

I do not want the liberty of men, nor their equality; I want only my power over them, I want to make them my property, material for enjoyment.

— Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*

Part One: An Overview

Introduction

The Ego and His Own (1844)¹ was written by a middle-aged Berlin school-teacher using the pseudonym Max Stirner. Johann Kaspar Schmidt, the man who would be Stirner, had studied under Hegel as a youth, and he was a regular attendee at a philosophical debating/drinking society also frequented by Marx and Engels, and others in the circle sometimes called the Young (or Left) Hegelians. Stirner's book has been influential, if somewhat quietly, in many philosophical, artistic, and anti-systemic traditions. Most importantly for us, it has influenced individualist anarchism, and therefore anarchism more broadly. In 2017, Wolfi Landstreicher published a new translation from the original German into English. When people talk about "egoism" they are basically talking about this book and its devotees.

Its influence is a strange thing. Very few anarchists I know have read it. Almost every anarchist has read writers who

thought Stirner was awesome and brought aspects of *The Ego and His Own* into their ideas (e.g. Emma Goldman, Renzo Novatore, Alfredo Bonanno). For many years, I thought of Stirner as a name that carried some weight, a serious thinker, in some way a part of our tradition, someone we respected, but whom I hadn't read, and I couldn't really explain what his deal was. Becoming more aware of egoism's content, as well as the mark and measure of its influence, *The Ego and His Own* has come to seem more and more like a central text for currents in anarchism that I oppose (individualism, nihilism, trying-to-change-things-makes-you-a-statist-ism², etc.). Wherever some anarchist wants to say that society (of any kind) is a prison, or that revolution is an inherently authoritarian pursuit, or that using the word 'should' is an assault on their wild freedom, Stirner is there.

¹ *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, also translated as *The Unique/Individual and Its Property*. Unless otherwise stated, any page citation is to Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington (London: Verso, 2014). In quotations, italics are Stirner's, while underline emphasis is my own.

² One of the worst parts of contemporary anarchism is the argument that revolution is bad because it tries to achieve a different world, i.e. to change things, whereas insurrection is great cause it doesn't try to make anything different. I had thought that this was a bit of underdeveloped foolishness that we would grow out of, by slowly overcoming the Cold War ideology that revolution is synonymous with Stalinism. Unfortunately, it appears its roots are deeper and more explicit than I imagined; Stirner lays it out quite clearly (295–6).

Criticizing this text is a struggle. It's an old book; not a tome, but hardly concise. Repetitive, contradictory, piss-poor reasoning wrapped in fair-to-middling and often ambiguous prose, it's got it all. We find within it arguments that consistency is bondage, and that reason and truth are meaningless illusions.³ This book encourages the principle that you can simply ignore the implications, antecedents, and interrelations of ideas you like, if these connections aren't to your liking. Stirner also has a habit of shifting abruptly between his own voice and the voice of people he completely disagrees with. Many instances are contextually clear enough that 90% of people would read it with the same understanding. In many other instances, though, it's ambiguous and that's how you get people claiming that Stirner was a capitalist and that he was an anti-capitalist, a communist and an anti-communist, and every other damn thing plus its opposite. Personally, I think he has no serious ideas about political economy (et al.) whatsoever and so just semi-ambiguously snarks in a bunch of different directions.

My point is that it's really hard, once you're acquainted with the book and the scene, the egoists, to write a straight-forward critique, and not get pulled in many different directions, trying to respond to what Stirner says, the contradictory thing Stirner also says, and the various egoist defenses of each of these

3 I, however, find inconsistency and contradictory reasoning to be emblematic of problems in said thought. I will, therefore, draw attention to contradictions within Stirner's work, for both this reason, and to head off the fanboys who will try to argue against my points by pulling out quotes where Stirner says the opposite. I'm aware.

things. For example, *The Ego and His Own* contains the most racist prose I have ever read in the original (as opposed to say, reading a book about fascists that quotes some of their racist trash):

[W]hen you are at the point of drowning, you like a Negro as rescuer as well as the most excellent Caucasian—yes, in this situation you esteem a dog not less than a man. (191)

If the heaven-storming men of Caucasian blood throw off their Mongolian skin, they will bury the emotional man under the ruins of the monstrous world of emotion. (62)

The history of the world, whose shaping properly belongs altogether to the Caucasian race, seems till now to have run through two Caucasian ages, in the first of which we had to work out and work off our innate negroidity; this was followed in the second by Mongoloidity (Chineseness), which must likewise be terribly made an end of. Negroidity represents antiquity, the time of dependence on things (on cocks' eating, birds' flight, on sneezing, on thunder and lightning, on the rustling of sacred trees, and so forth); Mongoloidity the time of dependence on thoughts, the Christian time. (59)

If I had before me Jews, Jews of the true metal, I should have to stop here and leave them standing before this mystery as for almost two thousand years they have remained standing before it, unbelieving and without knowledge. But as you, my dear reader, are at least not a full-blooded Jew—for such a one will not go as far astray as this—we will still go along a bit of road together. (22)

Stirner is racist. He believes it is both true that caucasians are superior to other races and is *rightly so*. He believes that the ways in which things should change is by

caucasians becoming *more caucasian*.⁴ Yet even stating basic facts like these, I can hear the chorus: ‘Race is a spook [so Stirner couldn’t have believed in it]!’; ‘That’s out of context!’ (it’s really not); ‘That’s a standard metaphor of 19th century Europe and thus it’s unfair to criticize Stirner in particular for it!’; ‘What about page 227?!’.⁵ I hear Wolfi making the laughable and baseless conjecture that all this “Mongoloidity” thing is just one big dark joke, since actually, secretly, Stirner is a Taoist!⁶

4 Although, apparently, “*Improving and reforming* is the Mongolism of the Caucasian, because thereby he is always getting up again what already existed—to wit, a *precept*, a generality, a heaven,” (62) but that get us into the whole ‘Stirner is consistently inconsistent’ thing.

5 Meaning these oft-cited lines: “Ridiculous is he who, while fellows of his tribe, family, nation, rank high, is—nothing but ‘puffed up’ over the merit of his fellows [...] Neither of them puts his worth in exclusiveness, but in connectedness, or in the ‘tie’ that conjoins him with others, in the ties of blood, of nationality, of humanity” (227). I see your page 227 and raise you the fact that a “German Union” is a possible and desirable thing for Stirner (215) and that “the Nationals are in the right; one cannot deny his nationality” (228). Not to mention that those lines so often quoted are followed immediately by the vapid Stirnerian quibble that “there is to be found a vast difference between pride in ‘belonging to’ a nation and therefore being its property, and that in calling a nationality one’s property” (227, emphasis mine). This opens wide the door for the many racists and nationalists who have enthusiastically incorporated Stirner and egoism (e.g. Kevin Slaughter, the publisher of Wolfi’s 2017 translation of Stirner, or Ezra Pound, or Julius Evola, or Keith Preston, or...).

6 On the basis of Stirner studying philosophy in university, attending a philosophical debating society, and being famous exclusively for publishing philosophical works in philosophy circles to be read by and defended from fellow trained enthusiasts of philosophy, Wolfi

Each of these responses demands a response in turn (you’ll notice that I’ve already failed to restrain some replies to them). I don’t think it’s possible, however, to present all sides: my reading of the text, plus alternative readings that have textual support (because of Stirner’s many self-contradictions), plus ways people read the text that have no reasonable textual support (e.g. Stirner was anti-racist, or a Taoist, or de Acosta’s “We are all Unions of Egoists” thing⁷), as well as my critiques of these varied and contradictory positions. I will instead try to present an overall summary of the book, including a couple ideas about how this book might have come to be written, followed by a deeper look at Stirner’s critique of the State. Then a bunch of egoists will tell me that I’m an idiot who’s completely misunderstood the

concludes that *actually* Stirner is *not* a philosopher, but someone who has completely rejected philosophy. In contrast, on the basis that Stirner never quite manages to give any content to the Self (*Einzig*) on which he has anchored his thought—which is seen as a tremendous parallel to the indescribable *Tao*, despite ‘the name for the Unnameable’ being a pretty standard mystical/theological construction in Christianity as well—and “buddhist, taoist, and other Eastern writings were available in Germany at the time,” Wolfi proposes that Stirner might be a Taoist. See his Introduction to *The Unique and Its Property* (Baltimore: Underworld Amusements, 2017).

7 De Acosta, *How the Stirner Eats Gods*. This zine is just... not at all a good summary of what Stirner says. Much of it reads like de Acosta liked Spinoza but Stirner had more chic so he just put Spinoza in Stirner’s voice. I fail to see the point in advancing an idea that many people have articulated in many ways—i.e. that the self is not a coherent, unified thing, correlating 1:1 with the individual human body—in the jargon of someone (i.e. Stirner) who has based his entire thought on the coherence of a discrete, indivisible, Unique, individual self.

text. My hope is not that anyone who has read this book and then began describing themselves as an egoist and acting based on its ideas will change their mind, but rather to trouble egoism's place in anarchism.

A Brief Summary

Throughout *The Ego and His Own*, Stirner makes near constant use of a simple dialectical method. While, at its most interesting, dialectical method means recognizing that change is a constant, and that we can only come to understand things as both products and producers of change, it is often grossly simplified into three linear steps. First, there is a thing; second, the overcoming of the thing; third, the overcoming of the

overcoming of that thing. This is also rendered as 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis' or as 'the thing, the negation of the thing, the negation of the negation'. Stirner's arguments almost always fall into this structure. More specifically, he uses many different analogies or parables to represent one specific crude dialectical construction: realism—idealism—egoism, or 'egoism in the ordinary sense'—'involuntary egoism'—'true egoism'. That is to say, *preoccupation with the world of things*, overcome by and transformed into a *preoccupation with the world of spirit/mind/ideas*, which is in turn overcome by and transformed into *true egoism*, i.e. concerning oneself only with one's self and relating to the world as an owner. Here are various other ways he renders this same construction:

Thesis	Antithesis	Synthesis
Realism	Idealism	Egoism!
Egoism in the ordinary sense	Self-denying egoism	True egoism!
Negroes	Mongols	Caucasians!
Ancients	Moderns	Future Men!
Child	Youth	Man!
Catholicism	Protestantism	Godless Egoism!
The uneducated	The educated	The true (educated) egoist!
Absolute State	Liberal State	The Union of Egoists!
Greeks	Christians	Egoists!
English philosophy	German philosophy	Stirnerite ('anti-') philosophy!
Jews	Christians	Egoists!

For Stirner, the world and its people—being, for the most part, in the 2nd stage of the dialectic—are caught up in a world of abstract concepts and ideas, especially or achetypically or foundationally, the concepts of "Good" and of "Man." For him,

people are "possessed" by these "spooks."

This is one of the central concepts of Stirner's thought. A spook—at the risk of defining undefined and flexibly-used terms—is a concept, principle,

or idea that has become “sacred.”⁸ That is, it has become separated from actual persons. Stirner makes full use of the way that anything expressible in language, or thinkable in thought can, by that fact, be rendered as a concept, and therefore an alien spook. This frequently happens in the form that other people become the *concept* of other people, and therefore a spook. The concept, rather than being “owned” or used by persons, has come to stand above and to dominate them. Stirner uses the post-Christian, atheist sensibilities of his audience (the Young Hegelians and their acolytes) to argue that concepts being championed as the overcoming of God—like humanism, communism/socialism, critical philosophy—are really just God in new forms. That is to say, they still are based upon the elevation of abstractions that do not actually exist to a position of domination over actual people.

8 This is another central concept for Stirner, as for many of his larger-looming contemporaries. See, for example, Marx and Engel’s *The Holy Family* (“holy” and “sacred” being two translations of *heilige*) which critiques the Young Hegelians, a scene at which much of Stirner’s critique is also aimed, as well as being a scene of which all three authors were in many ways participants. Or crack open your *Society of the Spectacle*, and read the Chapter I epigraph from Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (one of the major Young Hegelian works, which both M&E and Stirner critique): “*illusion* only is *sacred*, *truth profane*. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion come to be the highest degree of sacredness.” Or back up a couple pages (again, in the nearest-to-hand copy of *Society of the Spectacle*) and read Hegel saying “...in the case where the self is merely represented and ideally presented, there it is not actual: where it is by proxy, it is not.” Stirner is by no means the stand-alone, out-of-nowhere, unparalleled luminary that egoists imagine.

“Spook” and “the sacred” are joined by the “fixed idea” and the “Cause” as ways in which people are “possessed.” The fixed idea, or *l’idée fixe*, was a cutting-edge early 19th century pop psych term used to pathologize anarchists and other revolutionaries and rebels. In its use to pathologize and depoliticize those it labels, and distance them from ‘normal’ people, the fixed idea had a similar function to that of ‘radicalization’ today.

The Unique Individual, *der Einzige*, represents, in Stirner’s program, the overcoming of these *spooks*, of this *possession*, and the achievement of his dialectic’s third stage: true egoism, self-ownership.

Stirner also mounts a critique of freedom and those who pursue it. In contrast, he presents his concept of “Ownness.”⁹ For various reasons, freedom is not the pursuit of the egoist, but rather ownness, because, “Being free from anything—means only being clear or rid. [...] Freedom is the doctrine of Christianity. [...] Must we then, because freedom betrays itself as a Christian ideal, give it up? No, nothing is to be lost, freedom is to become our own, and in the form of freedom it cannot” (145). Much of Stirner’s argument here boils down to presenting “freedom” as negative freedom, freedom-from, and contrasting that with positive freedom, freedom-to, which he has renamed “ownness.” “‘Freedom lives only in the realm of dreams!’ Ownness, on the contrary, is my whole being and existence, it is I myself. I am free from what I am *rid* of, owner of what I have in my *power* or what I *control*” (145).¹⁰ This distinction between

9 *Eigenheit*, also translatable as ‘particularity’ or ‘peculiarity’.

10 This is a good example of Stirner’s ambiguous writing style. He often speaks in another’s voice

positive and negative freedom, however, was already well-established in Stirner's circles—and even if not made distinct, nowhere in Europe was freedom purely defined as a riddance. It's unclear why he would define freedom so narrowly, except so as to make space for his New Concept, "Ownness." The restrictive definition of a common concept, followed by new jargon given for the space created thereby: it's a classic move of the careerist intellectual.

These remarks on freedom also intersect with another aspect of Stirner's thought that crops up in several places (while also being contradicted in many others). Attempts to change social conditions are *causes*, which have us working for something outside of ourselves, and therefore being *possessed* by a *fixed idea*. "My own I am at all times and under all circumstances, if I know how to have myself and do not throw myself away on others. To be free is something that I cannot truly *will*, because I cannot make it, cannot create it: I can only wish it and —aspire toward it, for it remains an ideal, a spook" (145). Thus, freedom is thrice dismissed as merely freedom-from, as a spook, and as an expression of "Mongolism," i.e. trying to make things better.

Ownness, in contrast to what Stirner calls freedom, is a move of consciousness, a *reunderstanding* of one's situation as opposed to a *changing* of that situation. This distinction is centrally important to understanding what Stirner's thought is and is not.

As occurs in individualism as a

without using any kind of quotation mark, let alone any explanation of who he imagines to be speaking, while here he appears to be using inverted commas around something he himself thinks — "Freedom lives only in the realm of dreams!" — quoting no one.

broader current, Stirner slides between two extremes: ethical individualism, where respect for the individual and for individuality is the fundamental term of an ethical system; and an amoral solipsism, where I am all that matters and nothing has any value except insofar as it (or she, he, they, etc.) has value to me.¹¹ That is to say, the subject in Stirner's thought is at some points the Individual, of which there are many, while at others it is "I" alone, i.e. Stirner himself. In between these extremes Stirner often tours through a 'moderate' position of aristocratic elitism; here, it is not existence, nor life, nor sentience, nor humanity,¹² but rather *true egoism*, or *self-ownership* that entitles one to recognition as a person, or subject. Stirner's Einzige is defined by its incomparability to any Other: the attack on any proposed commonality between persons is one of the book's main thrusts. At the same time, Stirner writes wistfully of the recognition which true egoists give to each *other's uniqueness*.

At no point does Stirner ever try to understand the world. At all. At every single point where Stirner is ostensibly talking about the world as it actually exists, he is generally doing a bad crib job from a half-remembered 1830s German undergrad. I hope most people would

11 The ungainly hybrid of the two extremes, present in Stirner but also cropping up elsewhere among individualists, says that everyone gets along best when everyone pursues only their own self(ish) interest. Adam Smith made the most (in)famous attempt to explain how this could be true.

12 Here, I'm not meaning the 'concept of humanity' that Stirner spills so much ink presenting as being the foremost opponent of a life well-lived, but just membership in the human species.

recognize right away that in no way is he ever actually talking about Africa (you know, like an actual vast place with actual history where actual people actually live and lived). In fact he's just talking about Africa because and how Hegel did.¹³ His history of Europe is also trash. It is, in the first place a history of European *philosophy* (because he can't escape Idealism), not Europe (let alone 'civilization' or 'Man'), and it's a bad one at that. It goes like this: 'there were these Greeks [bad summary of Ancient Greek philosophy] and then Jesus came along and that made Christianity and then the Reformation happened and then there was Hegel and now meeeeeeeeeee!' His 'historical' remarks about the French Revolution also have only the smallest of intersections with the French Revolution as an actual historical event (both involve a character named Robespierre...).

The Ego and His Own begins and ends with a Goethe quote that is translated in two ways: more literally as "I have based my affair on nothing," or in a less direct rendering, by Byington, Stirner's first English translator, "All things are nothing to me." Wolfi, in the introduction to his new translation, proposes a reading of the book as a whole that amounts to this: "The point of the book is the first and last lines, *I have based my affair on nothing*, and everything

13 "Africa is the *country of the childhood* of history. In defining the African spirit we must entirely discard the *category of universality*. Among the Negroes consciousness has not yet reached a firm objective existence, as for example *God, law*, in which man would have the perception of *his essence*... thanks to which, knowledge of an *absolute being* is totally absent. The Negro represents *natural man* in all his lack of restraint." —Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*.

I take this point and this quote from Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 183.

in between is a piss-take of a bunch of ridiculous nonsense.' This echoes for me the response to Stirner's racism that says: 'It's obviously a weird 19th century metaphor, not an actual portrayal of non-European persons and societies.' At a certain level, I guess I agree. It *is* ridiculous bullshit based on nothing, and yes, it *is* Europeans talking about European ideas of the concept of the African, that doesn't actually successfully interact in any meaningful way with Africa or Africans. But I'm not convinced that Stirner is in on the joke. I think he believes what he says.

In sum, here are some things that are consistently said—and occasionally contradicted—that I think are the central claims and arguments of *The Ego and His Own*:

- **Each** consciousness is absolutely Unique and incomparable; equality is therefore meaningless and a spook. People are not equal, nor should equality be pursued.
- **To** each Unique belongs whatever they can appropriate to themselves (their property); whatever cannot be brought under your power is not yours and does not deserve to be. This includes relations of domination (the slave who cannot secure their freedom does not deserve it; there is nothing wrong with a master who *can* enslave people doing so).
- **There** is no right and wrong. That which is, is; that which can be done, can be done. That which does not exist should not be pursued.
- **Social** interaction should be, and fundamentally is, a struggle

for power by each (individual) party over and against every other. The victor is always right.

- **Also**, somehow, we are all imprisoned by the State/‘society’ and this is unfair.

- **Instead** of a State, or society, we should exist in a “Union of Egoists,” formed only of egoists giving their full, free consent at every moment to participate. In the union, everyone’s Uniqueness and property is respected and egoists pool their strength in order to ensure respect for their all being treated as equally Unique. They mutually ensure respect for each other and their property, while somehow, at the same time, everyone is relating to everyone else all the time as someone to which nothing is owed and everything can and ought to be appropriated to oneself at any opportunity.¹⁴

14 Yup, it’s an incredibly ridiculous and self-contradicting position that recreates the bourgeois state from scratch in Stirner’s mind and terminology. It’s the point where Stirner’s radical total critique—“prison society!”—gets sown back into his fundamentally conservative outlook (people only deserve what they already have; any attempt to change this is a sign of the dreaded fixed idea, yet another possession by the sacred). Your local egoist gets rock hard just hearing the words “union of egoists”; it’s their answer to every anarchist critique and it’s totally vapid.

Where is this coming from? Why did this book get written?

Take One:

A German youth named Johann, enraptured by the beauty and apparent power of ideas and of thought—to which I suspect many of the people reading this can relate—enrolls at the university. As Bakunin, as Marx, as so many of his contemporaries, he is astounded by the brilliance of that leading light of German Idealism, G.W.F. Hegel. Idealism and the dialectic: everybody’s doing it. Concepts are rolling around creating History. Johann’s whole world revolves around Spirit, true infinity, the concept, *aufheben*. After 25 years of this, Johann is a middle-aged schoolteacher who has struggled to find consistent work in that field, let alone as the brilliant lecturer he believes he could be. His main pasttime is being a wallflower at a debating club with some of his generation’s greatest philosophical minds. Philosophy is his whole life. His first wife dies shortly after their marriage. His second wife, Marie Dähnhardt, with whom he lived while writing the book and to whom he dedicated it, would later describe him as “a very sly man whom she had neither respected nor loved” and their three years together as “more of a cohabitation than a marriage.”¹⁵

Somewhere along the way, it occurs to him that the phenomenology of spirit might not be the most significant part of existence. A dispiriting (ha!) thought, but wait! Mightn’t this be a sign of his

15 Leopold, David, “Max Stirner”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/max-stirner/>.

exceptional genius—the kind so many of us are always, somewhere in the back of our minds, convinced we might be? In true Hegelian fashion, he has fought his way to the back of Hegelianism and overcome it with the startling realization that people are more real than concepts! And Johann may just be the realest of them all!

The end result of this sly man and his sad life¹⁶ is a book that can't find the clarity to state its central point (and if it had it would have saved us all a lot of time and trouble): our lives are completely and overwhelmingly dominated by abstract concepts which don't actually exist or have any power over us. One more time: all the problems in our lives and the world are caused by imaginary things that can be

16 Although save some pity for Marie, who not only had to live with the guy, but gets written up in *The Ego and His Own* as a pious bumpkin who only experiences a modicum of life and joy when Stirner fucks her (54–5), and then due to a probably unrequested dedication, gets shat on by pretty much every commentator, pro or con. The 1892 and 1962 introductions both feel the need to assert or repeat the claim that she couldn't possibly have comprehended this *incredibly brilliant* book, despite her being a regular attendee of the same debating club, *Die Freien*, before her relationship with Johann-Max began. Marx and Engels get after her too, with a bunch of shitty, derisive snark about a “Berlin seamstress.”

I will not be getting into Stirner and gender in this piece, choosing instead to focus on his remarks on the State. I will simply state that while I have encountered many people who understand Stirner to have radical and subversive gender politics, I do not at all agree. I think these are based on decontextualized misreadings of the text, where it is not simply an application of the egoist formula to a problem which the text does not confront: gender is a spook, and one overcomes gender oppression by insisting on one's Uniqueness and therefore the inapplicability of any gendered analysis or action to oneself.

overcome by ceasing to believe in them. Talk about basing your affair on nothing!

Yes, it's that classic one-two punch of dangerously vacuous and consistently popular ideologies: we are deeply oppressed, horribly victimized, but we also have all the power and so overcoming our hardships is simple and easy because our enemies are so weak as to be negligible. Like the white supremacy/victimhood narrative. Like ‘Our country is the greatest country in the world and we will be again!’ Like the progress narrative whereby History (or another Righteous Judge) will sweep away our enemies and bring us the good life, despite our present misery.

In fact, though, Johann was so unconvinced by his ability to overcome these spooks by ceasing to believe in them that, in addition to publishing under a pseudonym, Max Stirner, he includes in the text assurances to the censors that he advocates no kind of sedition. He also quit his job before the book came out to avoid the controversy. His contemporaries slagged it off; much of what seems like rigour and sweeping insight to later readers was obvious to his contemporaries as lazy cribs from Hegel and their undergraduate days. Marie left him. He made a little money translating Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say. He died of a sickness at 49.¹⁷

Take Two; Or, How does someone come to believe something as manifestly untrue as “Defend yourself and no one will do anything to you!” (182)?

Stirner had many things in his life that didn't work out the way he would have liked, but we can presume that his only experience of actual oppression, of being

17 All biographical information is from Wikipedia.

confined into a social role of being inferior and controlled—as with many non-racialized, non-proletarian men—was that of childhood. Childhood, in our society, is oppression (which manifests, of course, very differently with different relationships to race, gender, and class). What makes it quite particular is that most people pass *out* of this form of oppression within their lifetime.

It is common for European cultures to understand the self-assertion of boys of a certain age as marking their transition into adulthood, and therefore a relative or total cessation of the indignities of childhood. That is, most men have had the experience of overcoming structural oppression and disempowerment by simply asserting themselves. Not only does this ease or lift the imposition of childhood upon us, it is generally celebrated and rewarded with the powers and privileges of both adulthood and masculinity.

For example, I once had an instructor in a class teaching a manual skill-set. Early in the class, he told the story of his own teacher, who at a time of high stress kept getting into my instructor's business, nit-picking, harassing, and pressuring. Eventually, my instructor reached a breaking point and told his teacher to 'Fuck off!' His teacher immediately backed off and left him space to finish his work. When my instructor started giving me shit

in a high pressure situation ("Why aren't you done yet? What's taking so long?"), I knew that the same test/lesson was being applied to me and promptly told him to 'fuck off,' to the same positive effect. For me, and for him, it *was* true, in those situations, that simply defending ourselves would stop what was being done to us.

That is to say, the basis of Stirner's egoist ideas could perhaps be summed up as, 'Well, I was able to overcome social oppression by asserting myself, so clearly what is needed to overcome social oppression is nothing more, nor less, than self-assertion.' Indeed, Stirner repeatedly uses 'coming of age' as both an example of self-assertion and a parable of egoist practice in general. For example: "Behave as if you were of age, and you are so without any declaration of majority; if you do not behave accordingly, you are not worthy of it" (155). What is missed is an understanding that the reaction to a young man's self-assertion is *socially*-determined. Women and girls, for example, and particularly women of colour who attempt the same forms of self-assertion are, on the contrary, likely to have their self-assertion met with harsh negative consequences, rather than reward. This is not by any means to say that self-assertion is necessarily bad, just that the claims of Dr. Stirner's Quick-Fix Cure-All Tonic are wildly inflated.

Part Two: Stirner & the State

Without Stirner's vociferous critique of the State, it's unlikely he would have had as much influence among anarchists as he has. So let's look at it more closely. Stirner objects to the State primarily on

three bases: it takes away his freedom, his property, and his individuality, which for Stirner includes his ability to command and dominate others. He also says that egoism has nothing to do with freedom,

attempting to change the world, recognizing others as uniquely valuable in their own right (individuality), or guaranteeing anyone else's property. Yes, there are contradictions. His proposal for engaging the State, which he repeatedly claims will function to abolish it, is to ignore it, to pursue one's own interest rather than what is moral or right, to unthink it, and to "sin against" it (78). He is not an anarchist and he does not have anything significant to offer anarchists, because his objections to the State are not our objections to the State, his conception of the State is not the actual State which we confront, and his praxis for abolishing the State is useless, even as demonstrated in his own life.¹⁸ Further, his proposal for a non-State form of social organization—the Union¹⁹—is bankrupt. It does not address our concerns, does not meaningfully differ from the State, and is deeply self-contradictory to the point of meaninglessness.

What Is the State?

In analyzing society, we must always be on guard against reification (that is, rendering something concrete which is

not, e.g. treating a social relation as if it were an object). We talk about the State as a thing that acts on people as a shorthand, but we must never forget that that it is a shorthand. The State is a complex matrix of social relationships, relations among persons. This is not, of course, to say that it is a simple relationship, on the level of a dialogue, which could simply be ended by any party.

Stirner manages to play both extremes. On one hand, he describes the State, in the most patently absurd contract-theorist fashion, as something created in every moment by the consent of the people bound by it. "Let us then hold together and protect the man in each other [...] a fellowship of those who know their human dignity and hold together as 'human beings.' Our holding together is the *State*, we who hold together are the *nation*" (89). "One looks for the fault first in everything but *himself*, and consequently in the State, in the self-seeking of the rich, and so on, which yet have precisely our fault to thank for their existence" (108, underline emphasis mine), because "the master is a thing made by the servant" (181).²⁰

¹⁸ My point here is not that because the State was not abolished in their lifetime, an historical figure's views on praxis and struggle should be discarded. Rather, if someone says "all I have to do is X and the State will be abolished," then our observance that X failed (and fails) to abolish the State invalidates the claim.

¹⁹ Wolfi finds it desperately important to point out that the word translated as *Union* has nothing whatsoever to do with anything as embarrassingly passé as a labour union. Meanwhile, Stirner describes, positively and prescriptively—not to mention contradictorily, hypocritically—over several rambling pages (252–3 is the heart of it) the basic form and function of a labour union as if he were inventing it.

²⁰ A deeply foolish rendering of the basic fact that 'being a master' does not describe a characteristic of an individual, but their place in a social relation. Hegel is still the primary reference in European philosophy for this concept, and it is still referred to as the "master-slave dialectic" because of his discussion of it in the "Lordship and Bondage" section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Once again, Stirner is not only ripping off his old professor, but he's missing the point while he does it, consciously or not, by denying the relational element. Stirner cannot see a dialectical creation of persons through their relationships (which is actually the point of Hegel's writings on the subject), and here, as elsewhere, insists on articulating every relationship as being between one subject, and the subject's creations, objects, or property.

This togetherness is appalling to him. “What is called a State is a tissue and plexus of dependence and adherence; it is a *belonging together*, a holding together, in which those who are placed together fit themselves to each other, or, in short, mutually depend on each other: it is the *order of this dependence*” (207, underline emphasis mine). And yet “Certainly no objection can be raised against a getting together; but so much the more must one oppose every renewal of the old *care* for us, of culture directed toward an end” (226, emphasis mine).²¹ Also, “it is not another State (such as a ‘people’s State’) that men aim at, but their union, uniting, this ever-fluid uniting of everything standing” (208, underline emphasis mine).

On the other extreme, the State is described at many other points in Stirner’s work as a completely autonomous force that acts above and upon all humans. It has a will of its own which is not the will of any person. “The State [...] protects man not according to his labor, but according to his tractableness (‘loyalty’) — to wit, according to whether the rights entrusted to him by the State are enjoyed and managed in accordance with the will, that is, laws, of the State” (105, underline emphasis mine). “[T]he State betrays its enmity to me by demanding that I be a man, which presupposes that I may also not be a man [...] it imposes being a man upon me as a *duty*. Further, it desires me to do nothing along with which it cannot last; so its *permanence* is to be sacred for me” (165, underline

²¹ And yet, as Stirner says again and again, “a union you utilize [...] a union is only your instrument” (293). Utilize for what? Instrument to what? An end. Stirner’s State and Stirner’s Union are subject to no essential difference.

emphasis mine).²² “Own will and the State are powers in deadly hostility, between which no ‘eternal peace’ is possible” (181).²³ In this mode, the State is not a coming together of “men,” but a separate will which acts upon them.

Stirner writes with great vitriol about the State, but with no clarity. He cannot even decide which common, misleading simplification of the State to use to characterize it and so it remains presented as two mutually-contradictory falsehoods: the mass consensus of the social contract fable, and an inhuman God, acting in its own interest, to which all humans are subjugated.

The State & Morality

Along with being both nothing more than the coming together of persons, and a completely autonomous force that subjects all persons equally (we’ll get to this alleged “equality” under the state), Stirner also describes the State as something entirely dependent upon and reproduced through

²² How is it not true that Stirner’s Union, or even his whole system, “betrays its enmity to me by demanding that I be [an egoist], which presupposes that I may also not be [an egoist...] it imposes being [an egoist] upon me as a *duty*”?

²³ Although this is true, says Stirner, between any two own-wills. The tone of this quote is certainly one of “permanent conflictuality” that may resonate with those of us who identify the State as something with which they have a conflict endable only in triumph of one or the other. However, this is also Stirner’s conception of how any two persons interact. “[B]ecause each thing *cares for itself* and at the same time comes into constant collision with other things, the *combat* of self-assertion is unavoidable. *Victory or defeat*—between the two alternatives the fate of the combat waivers” (3) is on the very first page of the very first chapter.

morality.

Morality is incompatible with egoism, because the former does not allow validity to me, but only to the Man in me. But if the State is a society of men, not a union of egos each of whom has only himself before his eyes, then it cannot last without morality, and must insist on morality. (165)²⁴

Let us not get drawn too far into the tortuous arguments about how the State so unfairly “allow[s] validity” to the wrong aspects of Stirner (*‘I’m not a goth, Mom, I’m a wiccan!’*) but rather make some brief comments on morality.

It’s unclear what Stirner means by morality. Given his advocacy for relating to the entirety of the world as only one’s property, rather than as a complex web of relationships, it’s arguable that for him morality is the inverse of this, an attempt to deal between persons as relations,

rather than as a struggle for dominance. That said, he often seems to chafe at the ways morality is used as a form of control. At some points he claims that an actor’s selfishness renders their behaviour irrevocably outside the bounds of morality (278). On the other hand, when he castigates the morality of vaguely-defined others, he makes no attempt to discern where their interests lie, and while identifying morality as nothing more complicated than a form of social control, he (quite rightly) points out that people obey because of their self-interest (278). Morality cannot both function by, and be annulled by, self-interest. Selfishness cannot both purify actions of any taint of morality and be the means by which morality operates.

Morality is one of those frustrating words that is complicated, variously understood, and vaguely or not at all defined, but which is generally written about as if it was simple and commonly understood. What does seem to be agreed is that it is a big part of our lives, and so ought to be engaged. This ends up producing a lot of vague, but strident prose. Stirner identifies morality as the foundation of the State, and many are the anarchists who would say that morality is one of the things anarchist struggle seeks to destroy (or ‘should’ seek to destroy). But the definitions are slippery, and hard lines on shifting terrains should give us pause.

My preferred definition of morality, which feels more consistent with varied usages and also the most useful for the purposeful engagement with the world which I believe in, is this: Morality is reflecting on interactions with others in order to shape those interactions moving forward. It is as old as our species (at least), and includes, or is included in, every interaction any of us has ever had.

24 “The correct thing...” (224, emphasis mine), “Every people, every State is unjust towards the *egoist*.” (201, underline emphasis mine). Morality runs throughout this book. I find nothing wrong with that, besides hypocrisy. Just get over the fact that we, as human beings, care about what people around us do, and that it’s valuable to be able to talk about the effects of people’s behaviour in an anticipatory way. I have yet to encounter someone railing against morality who does not also engage in it, probably because if you truly have no opinion about what other people (or you) should or should not do, you’re not spending time writing or talking to people about what people do. Indeed an egoist defense of morality is pretty easy, and occasionally touched on: if I can shape other people’s behaviour to my liking by using morality, of course I—self-owned *Einzig*e that I am—will use it. And if other people (‘egoists’) will keep their hands from me if I keep my hands from them, then I recognize therein my advantage in keeping my hands from them, and thereby multiply my power. Congratulations! You’ve arrived at incredibly basic social skills only through 19th century philosophy jargon.

It encompasses every statement or query about how we should behave, every use of “should,” in fact, from the most categorical to the most nuanced and situational, from the most authoritarian to the most libertarian. To have an opinion about how one should behave or how others should behave towards you is to be moral. We are not *for* or *against* morality, because morality is not *good* or *bad* (or whatever terms in which a value judgement may be framed: anarchist or authoritarian, cool or not cool, “egoist” or “sacred”), but is simply the name we give to the process by which we decide what is.

The problems with Stirner’s remarks on morality are both that they misunderstand a very common and omnipresent aspect of our lives, and that they attempt to discard what is in fact an indispensable part of human existence: discussing how we ought to live together. While many would argue that dispensing with morality in no way disrupts our ability to discuss how we ought to live together, I can only say that this has not been my experience. I have found the anti-morality position to be far less an effective instrument for disrupting the incursion of authoritarian moral codes into anarchism and much more so a convenient way out of any conversation that any particular anarchist does not wish to have to have (an opting-out which can, in fact, defend authoritarian ways of living together). It was the often-repeated experience, over many years, of having certain sorts of anarchists react to any uncomfortable conversation about human behaviour and interaction as that great bogeyman *Morality* that has led to me to unabashedly reclaim it. I much prefer arguing against authoritarian moralities as *wrong*, *immoral*, rather than twisting myself into knots trying to justify the idea that “you shouldn’t have sex outside of wedlock”

is morality, but “you shouldn’t have sex without consent” is not. I also think it is helpful to remove the aura of confusion around anarchists who argue that being against snitching or rape is “morality” and therefore not anarchist because “it is forbidden to forbid.” In the end, what I want is for us to be able to keep having this conversation about how we should and shouldn’t live together. This conversation is the basis for our ability to shape new worlds to share. I find that conversation far easier to have if we don’t have to make elaborate concessions to those who insist that saying “if you did ____, that would be wrong” is identical to being the State.

A much more thorough look at these questions can be found in “Anarcho-Nietzscheans and the Question of Anarchist Ethics” in this volume.

Stirner’s Three Principal Problems with the State

Stirner’s objection with the State can be broken down into three categories: i) it makes everyone equal (both in the sense of equality and in the sense of sameness, commonality, lack of individuality); ii) it makes us unfree; and iii) it takes everyone’s property. There are two general problems with these objections. First, Stirner completely contradicts himself on all three points. It is his opinion that people are inherently both unequal and unique, and that this is a fact that no State has changed; that freedom is not in any sense the goal; and that property is that which one can secure for oneself and that therefore any ‘property’ of which you are deprived by the State is simply *not your property*. Second, these are *not at all what is wrong with the State*. With the possible exception of

the point about freedom. Stirner and I, however, mean quite different things by freedom so it's hardly a point of accord.

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

1) The State Makes Us Equals: Ummm... What?

Stirner hates the State because, in his mind, it makes everyone equal. He claims that "Political liberalism abolished the inequality of masters and servants: it made people masterless, anarchic" (132–3) and means that as an argument *against* liberalism. This sentence is a great example of his Idealism, of the way he cannot perceive (or perhaps is unconcerned with) the difference between *writing* 'persons should be equal' and actually making those people equal. But it also expresses his allegiance to domination. Anarchists are not liberals precisely because we know that liberalism's words about equality and freedom are nothing more than that, that they are at best a nice story and at worst a lie we are told to stifle our resistance. We are not liberals precisely because, unlike Stirner, we know that liberalism has *not* "abolished the inequality of masters and servants" and that it is in fact a barrier to the "masterless, anarchic" lives we want to live.

He sneers at this egalitarian world that he thinks exists because enough liberals have written that it ought to. "No more distinction, no giving preference to persons, no difference of classes! Let all be alike! No *separate interest* is to be pursued longer, but the *general interest of all*. The State is to be a fellowship of free and equal men, and every one is to devote himself to the 'welfare of the whole,' to be dissolved in the *State*, to make the State his end and

ideal. [...] So then the separate interests and personalities had been scared away [...] and before [the State] all were equal; they were without any other distinction — men, nothing but men" (90–91). Under the State, Stirner claims, "we are all of us right, and — *equal* — one worth no more and no less than another," and *this* is why he opposes it (94).

Stirner sees the right to dominate as an essential expression of the individual's uniqueness.²⁵ Therefore, his critique of the

25 Stirner claims that he doesn't believe in "rights." His critique is that he doesn't care at all about "rights" but only about "power" (92). He repeatedly derides those who would claim a "right" which they do not have the ability to bring about through their own power. All that goes out the window markedly when Stirner talks about the State, where suddenly Stirner's inability to do things, his lack of power is no longer *his own* fault, but suddenly something wrong in the State. "Right" is a common tool in describing the discord between what we are able to do and what we *ought* to be able to do. I therefore think it fair to use the language of rights in describing his critique of the state, as he uses the language of right to describe his solipsistic egoist ethics (173, 279), or when he describes Chinese serfs as not "having a right to [freedom]" (175).

This is not to say that there is not a legitimate critique of rights. A 'right' is a word that we use in two overlapping, but distinguishable ways. First, to talk with each other about our relationships with each other, about our expectations and responsibilities to each other. What's *cool* and what's *not cool*. A moral right. Second, as a piece of law that functions to maintain control and in many cases to deprive us of the exact thing which it purports to guarantee. A legal right. We mustn't fail to distinguish between these two things, between a State-made legal right, a mechanism of State control, and a way of talking between friends, neighbours, or comrades. We have to be able to tell the vast difference between a State telling you that you have a right (or that someone has a right against you) and, say, a person with whom you share

State for suppressing individuality, which individualist anarchists are more likely to reference (although some pro-hierarchy, pro-domination individualists still call themselves anarchists though they have no right to the name), falls in lock step with his absurd claim of the State's equalizing nature.²⁶ He says that "the State has no regard for my person, that to it I, like every other, am only a man, without having another significance that commands its deference" (93).²⁷ And yet while having "no regard" for the individual, "The State always has the sole purpose to limit, tame, subordinate, the individual" (211). We see this confusion about whether the State cares insufficiently or excessively about the individual even within a single page: "How individuals get along with each other troubles [the State] little," but also, "[T]he State cannot endure that man stand in a direct relation to man" (237).

As stated above, Stirner means "equal" in two distinct ways. Individualist anarchists are likely to emphasize his criticism of equal in the sense of *the same*, thereby depriving them of their beloved individuality. But let's be clear that Stirner means it also in the sense of *horizontal*, or *non-hierarchical*. For Stirner, as is the case with so many in the individualist pantheon, (dis)

community or struggle arguing that you have a right (or that someone has a right against you). Our inability to distinguish between two disparate uses of the same word is a recurrent weakness of our analysis.

²⁶ By no means is Stirner alone in thinking this. The fact that he has this misconception in common with many others of very different political outlooks makes it no less an evident falsehood.

²⁷ Being treated like a man by the State is *terrible*, whereas being treated like an object by an egoist is *friggin' rad!*

similarity and (in)equality, individuality and the ability to dominate others, are understood as the same thing. Yet anarchists, if the word is to retain any modicum of meaning or merit, want a world with neither masters nor slaves. Our objection to the State—the precise opposite of Stirner's—is that the State creates, reproduces, and defends relations of domination, not that it abolishes them. I mean, this anarchic, masterless coming together of equals in pursuit of the welfare of all is literally my goal as an anarchist!

Stirner was aware that masters and slaves still existed as he wrote. He takes time to explicitly state his non-opposition to these relations (although quite possibly he only talks about them because Hegel does, and not at all in reference to any actual, real-world relations). So if we are to seek out some kind of consistent thought, the best we can do is that when he talks about the State, he does not mean the actual thing, but the Utopian and completely imaginary idea of the State in the mind of a tiny group of 19th century philosophers, which never did and never will exist in reality. Yet, he doesn't object to it on the grounds that it is an outrageous fantasy with no relation to the actual form and function of the State, an ideological smokescreen for the interests of the bourgeoisie, created by those whose job it is to craft such myths... No, Stirner objects on the basis that he wants to be able, as a Unique individual, to dominate others.

People who describe themselves as anarchist (or communist) egoists tend to ignore or endlessly twist and massage and justify what I have said above in order to find some acceptable basis for placing Stirner in the anarchist tradition. Wolfi, for instance, states that "all rulers are

ruled by the system of ruling,”²⁸ which is silly. First of all, it has no direct basis in Stirner (whose thought clearly influences the construction). Over and over again, Stirner rails against any principle which would hold the individual back from doing anything within their power. Second, the problem with the whole “spook” argumentation is that it means nothing more than something which is immaterial, which everything expressible in language is, even if only insofar as it thereby is both signifier (a mere spook!) and signified. Until these ideas get some depth and complexity, rather than just being the jargon in which egoists insist on articulating their morality, they don’t help us to make clear assessments of our world and possibilities, nor to communicate with each other about our ideas. One could just as easily talk of being ‘ruled by the sacred Cause of rulerlessness.’²⁹

Indeed, Stirner says that he would rather be beaten down by the force of a dominating ego than constrained by a powerless spook, i.e. that it is better to be ruled by a ruler than ruled by the sacred Cause of rulerlessness. Specifically, he favourably compares being completely dominated and overpowered by an egoist opponent to being “scolded” by social

mores (197). Surely someone who has left these spooks behind should care nothing for this scolding, should feel no constraint from other beings, which are nothing more than his property? Surely such “things are nothing to” him? Surely a true egoist, having no such “fixed idea” or “Cause” which blinds him to the present with visions of the future should be so concerned with *how things ought to be*, but only concern himself with where and how he gets on best? And so, Stirner, do you get along best beaten to the ground and bent to the will of an egoist? Or *tsked* at for rudeness by moralists? Further, in this same paragraph he refers wistfully, in classic Stirnerian self-contradiction, to the imaginary egoist who besets him as “his equal.”

As in all of his objections to the State, this complaint of enforced equality runs directly counter to everything he has to say about right and power. While Stirner repeatedly bemoans, over and over and over, all the things the State does to him or prevents him from doing, he also repeats, *ad nauseam*, that people have no right to anything they do not already have, anything that they cannot secure with their might and will. So what right has he, under his system, to a distinction and inequality which he cannot secure by his *will* and *power*?

If the State has taken anything from Stirner, it was nothing to which he had any legitimate egoist claim. He says “The State does not let me come to my value” (237), but when anyone *else* voices a concerns about the State or society, he has nothing but contempt. “One is not worthy to have what one, through weakness, lets be taken from him; one is not worthy of it because one is not capable of it” (249). “If they could have it, they would have it,” he says, in round

28 Wolfi Landstreicher, “An Open Letter Concerning a Witch-Hunt” July 17, 2017, <https://anarchistnews.org/content/open-letter-concerning-witch-hunt>.

29 As Marx and Engels put it: “[S]ince every object for the ‘ego’ is not only *my* object, but also *my object*, it is possible, with the same indifference towards the content, to declare that every *object* is not-my-own, alien, holy. One and the same object and one and the same relation can, therefore, with equal ease and with equal success be declared to be the holy [i.e. sacred, a spook] and my property” (*The German Ideology*, 314).

dismissal of all who fight for what they lack (128). “Have Chinese subjects a right to freedom?” Stirner ponders. “Just bestow it on them, and then look how far you have gone wrong in your attempt: because they do not know how to use freedom they have no right to it, or, in clearer terms, because they have not freedom they have not the right to it. [...] ‘What you have the *power* to be you have the *right* to.’ I derive all right and all warrant from *me*; I am *entitled* to everything that I have in my power” (175). More specifically, when it comes to his own pocketbook, he rails against the State which pays him less than he feels he deserves (68). But for the rest of us, says Stirner, everything is as it should be: “you have as much money as you have — might; for you count for as much as you make yourself count for” (248).

Anarchists who identify with egoism are also likely to point to the following lines, the beginning of which I quoted above:

Political liberalism abolished the inequality of masters and servants: it made people masterless, anarchic. [...] Now masterlessness is indeed at the same time freedom from service [...] But, since the master rises again in the State, the servant appears again as subject.
(132–3)

Their argument is likely to be that Stirner’s point is not that we are *actually* masterless, but that we are all now subject to the same master, the State. But this—again, Idealism—is to confuse myth, romance, and justification for actual social relations. It is like missing the irony in that old chestnut, that “In its majestic equality, the law forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets and steal loaves of bread.”³⁰ We are not equal under

the State, nor equally subject to the State, whatever their various Declarations say.

2) The State Restricts Our Freedom (But the Stirner Don’t Mind)

“But *I* am free in *no* State.” (210)

Unlike most of Stirner’s other objections to the state, I don’t disagree as such. The State does make us unfree. This is one of the problems with it, no doubt. The problem here is not that the simple claim is wrong, but that what Stirner means by freedom is not what I, nor anarchists generally, I think, understand by freedom. It’s also not really even a genuine egoist objection to the State; consider his comments about the State making us unfree in the context of his other remarks on freedom. When Stirner says “freedom” he refers to something that can never be achieved and that should not be pursued, as we discussed above in relation to his discussion of “Ownness.” “[I]n reference to *liberty*,” Stirner writes, “State and union are subject to no essential difference” (288). When anarchists say that the State makes us unfree, we refer to constraint, confinement, and coercion. When Stirner does so, he means that under the State we are not “rid of everything” (288), nor will we ever be, even in the best of circumstances, as Stirner and I both agree. However, I am not under the impression that I say anything of much import in stating such banal truisms, nor do I think that the best of circumstances would actually involve being “rid of” more things.

30 Anatole France, *The Red Lily* (1894).

3) The State Prevents Stirner From Making You His Property

The third pillar of Stirner's objection to the State is that it prevents him from having property. To unpack this, we'll have to look at what he thinks property is, how and why Stirner's (completely ahistorical and unrealistic) conception of the State prevents people from having property, and then sketch out some brief remarks on a more truly anarchist and more relevant understanding of property.

Stirner's understanding of property is that of a relationship between a person and a thing, wherein the person exercises complete control and domination.

Nevertheless, property is the expression for unlimited dominion over somewhat (thing, beast, man) which 'I can judge and dispose of as seems good to me.' [...] What I have in my power, that is my own. (234)

[L]et me claim as property everything that I feel myself strong enough to attain, and let me extend my actual property as far as I entitle, that is empower, myself to take. [...] [W]hat I want I must have and will procure. (239)

The "thing" in this relationship, as we see above, can be not only a thing, but a "beast" or a "man" as well. It can also be any idea, or action, of another, or even (despite Stirner's occasional claims to oppose any division of the Self) any part of oneself which can be perceived as distinct from the Self—your thoughts (239), your feelings (273), your leg (146), and so on. Stirner's whole system could be summed up by

saying that anything which is not the Self³¹ can only either possess you (be *sacred*, *holy*, a *fixed idea*, which is bad!) or be possessed by you (be your *property*, be *owned* by you, which is good!).³²

With regards to the action of any other person, and as an attempted alternative to morality (although it still prescribes a right way of behaving towards others) Stirner says: "the correct thing is that I regard it either as an action that *suits me* or as one that *does not suit me*, as hostile or friendly to *me*, that I treat it as my property which I cherish or demolish" (224, underline emphasis mine). The goods of others also, Stirner claims as his *property*, for they, "the sensuous as well as the spiritual, are *mine*, and I dispose of them as proprietor, in the measure of my — might" (230). Well, at least until his remarks on the Union, wherein each egoist's property is, instead, "secure" (241).

Not just the actions and goods of others, but these *people themselves* are to be claimed as property by the egoist.

[L]et us seek in others only means and organs which we may use as our property!

31 And sometimes even including one's Self: "My power *am* I myself, and through it am I my property" (171).

32 As ever, one could produce contradictions to this, or invent them 'as an act of egoist love,' as the egoists like to say. One I will draw attention to is his rumination on the Right Action if one is an egoist slave, wherein it is claimed that "owning" oneself somehow prevents one from being possessed. Stirner uses this as an argument against freedom, and so perhaps doesn't notice its relation to his remarks about property (where it is of no concern how your possessions understands themselves, but only whether you have control over them). The common thread, of course, is the foregrounding of consciousness. As ever for the Idealists, one's ideas about a situation are the most important factor.

As we do not see our equals in the tree, the beast, so the presupposition that others are our equals springs from a hypocrisy. No one is my equal, but I regard him, equally with all other beings, as my property.³³ [...] For me no one is a person to be respected, not even the fellow-man, but solely, like other beings, an object in which I take an interest or else do not, an interesting or uninteresting object, a usable or unusable person. (291, emphasis mine)

When Stirner says no one, he means *no one*. “My love is my own only when it consists altogether in a selfish and egoistic interest, and when consequently the object of my love is really *my* object or my property” (274). To erase any confusion, he immediately clarifies this relationship. Speaking specifically of his “love” but in a general form which applies to all egoist relationships (which is to say, property relationships), he says, “I owe my property nothing, and have no duty to it, as little as I might have a duty to my eye” (274). If you find this sweet, because, as Stirner goes on to say, “if nevertheless I guard it with the greatest care, I do so on my own account,” (274) I urge you to consider the disparate rates at which men murder the objects of their love, for exactly the reason that they consider that person *theirs*, as compared to the rates at which men gouge out their own eyes.

If I have one goal with this essay it is that statements like these ring in your mind whenever people call themselves

egoists, or positively refer to Stirner. *These* are the summations of his ideas: “I do not want the liberty of men, nor their equality; I want only *my* power over them, I want to make them my property, *material for enjoyment*” (297).

The egoist’s quest (“the correct thing”) is to protect, preserve, and extend one’s property, one’s power and domination. Stirner objects to the State because it attempts to mediate this relationship, that it therefore *deprives* the egoist of property by being the guarantor of property.

Under the dominion of the State there is no property of mine. [...] Through property, with which it rewards the individuals, it tames them; but this remains its property, and every one has the usufruct of it only so long as he bears in himself the ego of the State, or is a ‘loyal member of society’; in the opposite case the property is confiscated. [...] Property is mine by virtue of God and law only so long as—the State has nothing against it. [...] ‘the State,’ is proprietor, while the individual is feoffee. (235-6)

This, as we have said, is one of his primary complaints against the State, despite his ruminations on property: “What I have in my power, that is my own. So long as I assert myself as holder, I am the proprietor of the thing; if it gets away from me again, no matter by what power, as through my recognition of a title of others to the thing—then the property is extinct” (234, emphasis mine). Therefore, either he has the property or he does not. The State, by definition, deprives him of nothing which is *actually* or *rightfully* his.

Stirner contrasts this situation with two contradictory egoist alternatives: the war of all against all, in which no property of another is ever respected; and the Union of Egoists, in which one’s property is secured. He states his two positions many

³³ Recall, that Stirner refers positively to a state of equality between two opposing egos, who meet as “equals” (197). I would also argue that his remarks about a child “prefer[ring] the *intercourse* that it enters into with *its fellows*” (286) and the repeated affirmations of the satisfaction of egoists relating to each other as egoists, are a recognition of commonality, of something shared between persons who are, in some basic sense, equal.

times, but at one point he says them one after another: “If men reach the point of losing respect for property, every one will have property, as all slaves become free men as soon as they no longer respect the master as master. *Unions* will then; in this matter too, multiply the individual’s means and secure his assailed property” (241).

If for some reason we are unclear on whether “losing respect for property” grants everyone property, the analogy to slavery should make the worthlessness of this Idealist construction perfectly clear. Slavery is not secured by slaves “respect[ing] the master as master” (you fucking asshole) but by beatings, chains, rape, the holding of loved ones as hostages, etc., etc. Slavery, like all property relations, is, at its base, not maintained by “respect,” as an Idealist philosopher’s pie-in-the-sky approach would have it, but by terror, bondage, and violence—by material relations of force. Please see also the discussion above regarding Stirner’s claim that defending yourself means no one will do anything to you (which of course implies that those who have been harmed must have failed to try and defend themselves). This is why Stirner’s ideas (and those of so many others) are, at absolute best, deeply limited: Ultimately, it is not the way we think about the situations we face in this world that is the problem, but the situations themselves. While changing the way we think about the situations we face is almost always a necessary precondition for acting to change them, this is not what Stirner is saying.

Furthermore, the mythic Union’s “secur[ing]” of property (or as he says on page 292, “Property is recognized in the union”) follows the exact same reasoning he uses to say that the State *deprives* him of property. Presumably, because we have

once again reached a conservative peak in Stirner’s oscillating positions. We have seen Stirner objecting to the State on the basis that its guarantee of property means that it, rather than the individual, is the true proprietor. Now, Stirner, to whom the securing of one’s property is of the utmost importance, says that there can be no egoist objection to egoists coming together in agreement to recognize, secure, and defend each other’s property. They are simply “multiply[ing] the individual’s means” (241)! If it is the Union that secures property *against the will of an egoist*, which is the only thing against which the property could be secured, as we will discuss below, then the logic that Stirner uses against the State applies to the Union just as well.

Let us look further at what securing property through collective agreement means, and how that pairs Stirner defining the Union as something immediately dissolvable by any egoist. Securing or recognizing property means classifying property according to ownership and then preventing by some means that ownership changing except by proper means (which would have to be something other than ‘whoever can take it, does’, because in that case the Union’s recognition or securing is irrelevant, meaningless). If an individual, as an act of egoist will, musters their strength and is sufficiently powerful to obtain the desired property *but* for the Union, then they would simply *dissolve* the Union. That is, a Union either secures and recognizes property and therefore is not the substance-less pure-agreement which can be dissolved at any time which it is described as being—“As long as there still exists even one institution which the individual may not dissolve, the ownness and self-appurtenance of Me is still very remote” (201)—or it does not secure

property. Indeed, we can dispense with any claimed power, value, or meaning of the Union with the same method. Can this power play a meaningful role in the egoist war of all against all? If so, is it not being used against an ego? Can this ego dissolve the Union and thereby dispense with the alleged power mustered against him? If the answer is ‘No,’ then it’s not a Union. If ‘Yes,’ then this power is nothing.

We can be habituated to thinking of property as a relation between persons and things, in which the property-holder is entitled to use or dispose of their property in any way they see fit. This is an example of reification. This way of understanding the property relation goes back to Roman law, which defined property, *dominium*, in precisely this way. For a tool, for example, to be my property means, we often think, that I can use it or throw it on the ground or smash it to pieces, and that this choice involves no other persons. This is the common-sense understanding of property which gets us through the day. A moment’s thought, however, shows us that this is absurd. A tool and I cannot have a relationship. If there are no other relevant persons, it is nonsensical to say that it is its condition as my property that means I can use the tool. I either can or can’t; it’s not a question of whether or not the tool is my property. Property is always a relation between persons, *expressed* through things.

Relationships among persons expressed as expectations and obligations among said persons about objects (e.g. who is allowed, under what circumstances, to make what use of a certain object) have existed in every human society. To call all of these relations “property” is, in my opinion, absurd, or at the very least, tremendously unhelpful. There is however no need, as everyone involved in

this discussion (me, you, and Stirner) has a common understanding of what property specifically and socially means (not that we agree, necessarily, but that we exist within these relations and must understand them in order to navigate capitalist society). We all exist under a relatively continuous European tradition of property law. Its central function, to the point of marginalizing all others, has been, since well before Stirner’s birth, to create, defend, and reproduce property relations as the means of compelling labour from those who lack property, for the benefit of those who have property. Roman *dominium*, a relation between a person and a thing in which the person has absolute power and use of the thing, comes to be seen as an ontological baseline (‘this is just how it is’), with law acting as a series of restrictions and structurings, which make that right of use conditional.³⁴ This is precisely Stirner’s view of property. He sees nothing wrong in property, nor in property as a means for profit (or ‘realizing one’s value’ as he prefers it), but rather only in restrictions on the ways in which he may use his property.

These ‘conditions’ or ‘exceptions’, however, are the actual content of property relations in our time and place and in Stirner’s. The concept of absolute power—to do with a thing as you please, without concern for your relations with any person—is a deliberately reproduced fantasy. It has no meaningful existence

³⁴ Property was articulated in this way by the Romans—and this also harmonizes with Stirner’s use of it—because of the centrality of slavery. I said above that a person and a thing cannot have a relationship. The exception is when a *person* has been made into a *thing* through enslavement. The connection between our understandings of property, Roman law, and slavery come to me from David Graeber, *Debt* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011).

in any human society, and functions in our capitalist society only to mask the function of actual property relations (the reproduction of class society) and to give a human narrative to the pursuit of endless accumulation, which draws one asymptotically closer to the ability to be unbound by any relational obligation at all.

That is, the *dominium* fantasy, which is Stirner's as well as that of capitalist 'libertarians,' sees the problem of property as the State-imposed restrictions which hamper a property-holder's ability to do with a thing as they please. The *actual* problem with property relations is that they impose misery, degradation, and death on the vast majority of sentient beings, through outright dispossession or through conditional access to means of life (through wage labour, marriage, or other forms of work). In Stirner's fantasy, the State *prevents him* from having property as is his right as a Unique. In actual fact, property is a set of relations, *enforced by the State*, that functions to keep us under control and working to keep the flow of wealth moving upwards, so that the vast majority might suffer immeasurably while good things accrue to the powerful.

I am, of course, speaking as a proud member of the "ragamuffin crew" (108) who wishes to see the abolition of property, and who, contrary to whatever certain self-described 'egoist-communists' think, Stirner spends so much of his book mocking and dismissing.³⁵

35 "If the Communists conduct themselves as ragamuffins, the egoist behaves as proprietor. [...] Property, therefore, should not and cannot be abolished; it must rather be torn from ghostly hands and become *my* property" (241). The word that's being translated as "ragamuffin" here is "Lump(en)," a smear used primarily against anarchists and other wretched rebels

He Has Based His Praxis on Nothing

Thus far, we have looked at Stirner's basis for his unkind words about the State and how that compares with our own reasons for being anti-State. We should never take for granted that hatred for the State represents an essential affinity with anarchist politics. For historical reasons, our tradition has tended to strongly emphasize our opposition to the State.³⁶ This emphasis, as well as things about the social composition of our milieux, can lead us to assume that an anti-State orientation is not only the most important part of anarchist politics, but a unique contribution of anarchists. Nope: lots of people hate the State, or talk like they do, and this is not always an expression of their 'innate rebel spirit' or whatever.

But what about praxis? Resistance? A way forward? Maybe Stirner is like a mirrored image of the Marxist tradition. While Marx and Marxists have had a lot to offer in terms of articulating a critical analysis of the State and aspirations for its abolition, their tradition has at the same time been consistently dominated by a strategic engagement with the State that has not only completely failed to achieve its hopes for the liberation of the oppressed, but has succeeded in creating its own distinct nightmares of oppression and exploitation. Perhaps Stirner pairs a poor

for a long, long time, most famously by Marx.

36 Anarchists have generally articulated our politics in dialogue (rhetorical or direct) with state-optimists, generally of the liberal and Marxist variety. Our critiques of the state-pessimist or state-negative expressions of reactionaries like capitalist 'libertarians' or, you know, Max Stirner, are underdeveloped.

analysis with valuable strategic insights?

Alas, no.

Predictably, given his sneering dismissals of ‘trying to change things’ — which, given his whining about how the State prevents him from this-and-that are not rooted in a consistent dedication to this principle, but are merely coping mechanisms for dealing with a sense of powerlessness and a lack of ideas familiar to many of us — Stirner doesn’t have anything to offer us in terms of a way forward against the State. He argues that the State, like all “spooks,” can simply be recognized for the harmful falsehood, and *disbelieved, unthought, sinned against*, as long as one is a true egoist, in possession of will and *ownness*.

When he says that “the State can be really overcome only by the impudent self-will” (139), he does not mean that will is a characteristic necessary for the complex and difficult tasks which we might in sum call ‘overcoming the State’ (or revolution). He means that “impudent self-will” is not only “necessary” but *sufficient*, and uniquely so, to the accomplishment of such an overcoming. That is, we do not change our attitudes *in order* to overcome the State; rather, in so changing them the State is, Stirner thinks, overcome. “[F]rom this moment State, Church, people, society, and the like, cease, because they have to thank for their existence only the disrespect that I have for myself, and with the vanishing of this undervaluation they themselves are extinguished” (265).

Unfortunately, as the historical record shows, Stirner failed to extinguish the State and Church through his affirmations.³⁷

37 “Because I [care nothing for being] good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people [are my property]!”

We have seen his awareness of this failure in his consciousness that his book would be subject to State censorship. *The Ego and His Own* includes perhaps the first instance of the attempt to make a legal disclaimer look tough, as well as some explicit justification for it. *Ah, but if I make it past the censors, by changing my writing to make it past the censors, because I wanted to get past censors and not because I fervently believed in their righteous cause of censorship, I have won!* My dude, this is how censorship, and repressive law generally, works, not how you overcome it.

In his remarks on censorship, and elsewhere, we see the second, and contradictory, egoist ‘anti’-State praxis. *Try to get what you can out of it*. He generalizes his remarks about gaming the censors by censoring yourself in order to get past them. He argues that as long as you follow laws, or do anything at all really, *out of a sense of self-interest*, the title of true egoist is yours and you are not only free from the State, but bringing it down.

Top three reasons this is bullshit? One, it hasn’t ever had any effect. Never, nowhere, has the State been weakened or pushed back, let alone abolished, by the pursuit of individual self-interest. Self-interest is how laws work. *Do this or we hurt you*. Never has fervent dedication and loyalty superseded fear of consequences as the primary reason for obedience — neither in terms of subjects’ behaviour, nor in terms of what is sought by the State.

Two, Stirner and I *agree* about this. Remember? “[T]he State does not count on our credibility and love of truth, but on our *interest*, our selfishness” (278).

Three, Stirner believes that everyone, everywhere, always has and always will do nothing but pursue self-interest, that

egoism is a basic part of our nature.³⁸ The narrow window of our accord has closed. If this is how everyone is always already behaving, how is this an effective strategy against the State? It's not, because Stirner is not after an effective strategy against the State, but rather his own self-interest. Meanwhile, the State owes its entire existence to its ability to mobilize and carry out harm to those who act against its purpose (social control and the reproduction of class society). No conception of cold individual self-interest, which refuses all notions of sacrifice and dismisses all principles as mere "spooks," has a chance of overcoming the State's ability to incentivize obedience.

In the dialogue Stirner carried out with critics of *The Ego and His Own* in the pages of a philosophy quarterly, he argued that the Union of Egoists is not something that *could* come into being, but rather something that already exists, everywhere friends decide to go to a bar together, for example. This poses the much-vaunted Union as not much at all, much less than it

is often made out to be in the book. It also reveals the utter shallowness of Stirner's critique. Stirner can't see the State, or 'society,'³⁹ in friends going to a bar. We can see a similar shallowness in the book, where he defines "civil society" as "the sphere of 'egoism's' activity" (89).

More often, and pretty consistently in *The Ego and His Own*, the Union of Egoists is portrayed as an irreconcilable alternative to, and an "annihilation" of, the State, as opposed to friends going to a bar together, which happily coexists with the State.⁴⁰ The point is not that only that which negates the State has value, but that the forming of a Union of Egoists is not an anti-State praxis, even in Stirner's own description at

38 Which raises the whole 'So why'd you write this book?' question. 'Well, see, everyone's always already an egoist, but it's better (somehow) if they consciously recognize this fact.' Stirner can offer no evidence as to why this would be true. He gets caught up in the back-and-forth, never-acknowledged, flip-flopping contradictions. Everyone's already an egoist. But not a true egoist cause they act for spooks like 'a better world' or 'other people'. They should be true egoists, conscious egoists, like me! Everything's fucked up cause nobody has the courage to be a true egoist! But, of course, if somebody can get things for themselves through things like the State and the Church, nothing wrong with that. And I don't even care what other people do, anyway, cause I'm only concerned about myself. Just like everybody else, cause we're all already egoists. So everything's as it should be. Unparalleled genius, I tell ya.

39 Like many since, Stirner uses 'society' as a sloppy catch-all term for 'the bad stuff', a *total critique* that unites all things and critiques them negatively and dismissively. This dulls our analysis by using a tidy shortcut which both dismisses things of value and prevents us from seeing, in a nuanced way, the interrelations between what we value and what we oppose. Everything must be sorted between 'society' and 'not society' so we fail to see the objects of our critique in what we love, and the cracks in what we oppose through which good things may still shine.

40 "Therefore we two, the State and I, are enemies. I, the egoist, have not at heart the welfare of this 'human society,' I sacrifice nothing to it, I only utilize it; but to be able to utilize it completely I transform it rather into my property and my creature; that is, I annihilate it, and form in its place the *Union of Egoists*." (165, underline emphasis mine.) Note how "utilize", "transform into my property", and "annihilate" are treated as synonymy. As anarchists, the difference between 'utilizing the State' and 'annihilating the State' is rather important to us. Also as anarchists, we ought to be appalled by the reduction of all relationships between persons to property relations, a core principle of Stirner, and never to forget, when an egoist tries to pretty it up, that for Stirner "property" is synonymous with "use" and "annihilation."

times.

Conclusion

Stirner's conception of the State as a community-minded egalitarianism, a coming-together, a concern for the way one's actions affect others is probably his worst legacy in anarchism. Caring for people outside of yourself; valuing them for their own reasons as opposed to their mere usefulness; relating to the ideas and actions of people that do not have power over you—fellow anarchists, for example—as something you are allowed to criticize on the basis of its effects on your shared community: these things are not the State and they do not reproduce the State. There is a gigantic difference between a community and a State. If you can't tell the difference, your analysis will be weak, if not irrelevant, and your praxis is likely to be off-base, if not actively harmful. Not only that, but once you begin to lay out a positive vision of living together—because humans need each other like we need air, water, and food—if you haven't distinguished community and State, you're likely to reimagine, recreate, and fail to avoid the things that make the State our enemy.⁴¹

The State is not a bad idea that you can just unthink. It is prisons, and the social relations that put people in them. It's guns, and the social relations that determine their use. It's the things upon which humans depend for survival, and the social relations which structure how these things are distributed: by whom to whom, by what means, under what conditions. We have to stop pretending that anarchist goals can be

accomplished using the techniques of *The Secret*.

Properly anarchist goals, our long-term visions, are qualitatively different from anything an individual can do as an individual, and the abolition of the State is one example. Any individual can take some form of action against the State. A whole bunch of individuals can take such actions. But the *abolition* of the State is something that no individual, or even a bunch of individuals *acting as individuals*, can achieve. We sometimes hear the argument that if a significant enough number of individuals attack, they could abolish the police. This is only true if we ignore the complexity of shifting social dynamics. As is often missed by the implicit argument behind the slogan 'it's easy to attack,' the ease and effectiveness of attack are related to the social meaning of attack. Abolishing the police is not a matter of sufficient numbers of (easily) broken windows or burnt cars; it is a matter of the creation of a social force (whose activity almost certainly includes, among other things, destruction of infrastructure) powerful enough to abolish the police and oriented towards that end. The imminent or actual creation of such a social force is definitely going to change the conditions of our actions, including the ease of attack.

There are no easy answers because, in a cruel joke of existence, our consciousnesses are situated at a level that cannot directly make the oh-so-necessary systemic changes. Each of us is like an individual gut microbe trying to affect digestion. Straight-up lies, like that self-respect extinguishes the State—as comforting an illusion as it might be, given what we're up against—must be abandoned. Yes, let us multiply our force by uniting together with

⁴¹ See all the overlap between what Stirner hates about the State and what he describes as features of the Union.

clarity of purpose and vision, with a dedication and a desire to grow a power that helps us build and shape new worlds for us to live in. Egoism and rigid self-interest are obstacles — rather than, as some anarchists would argue, the necessary preconditions — for such a force.

Against der Einzige.
Against sein Eigentum.

For collective liberation
and anarchic masterlessness.



A black and white photograph of a person's hand holding a large, textured rock or piece of paper. The hand is visible on the left side, gripping the edge of the material. The material itself is highly textured, with various shades of gray and white, suggesting a rough, organic surface like a rock or a piece of aged paper. The lighting creates strong shadows and highlights, emphasizing the texture. Overlaid on the upper portion of the image is the text 'Making Our Relationships More Free' in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

Making Our Relationships More Free

Making Our Relationships More Free

I want all of us to imagine a future where our relations to each other, and the rest of the world, are more free. By freedom, I mean social relations in which it is possible to reflect on our relationships in order to decide how we want to change them, and therefore to be able to change ourselves. Despite the prevalent worldview that assumes our existence is fundamentally individual, I believe that life on this planet is fundamentally based in our relationships with one another. It is in this context that we should imagine our freedom.

One important starting point is that we cannot be more free by having fewer connections or fewer responsibilities. This is an attempt to have freedom through alienation. When we exist in a world of relations that hurt and dominate us, alienation from those relations may appear to be a kind of liberation. However, if we do not fight for our relations of domination to be replaced with relations of freedom, then the underlying situation has not changed. By domination, I mean social relations of enforced control and hierarchy in which some benefit at the expense of others.

A second important starting point is that we cannot be more free by dominating others. Relations of domination are the opposite of relations of freedom and can never make us more free. We fundamentally exist through our relationships, and I will be using the term interdependence to describe this reality. This is why, in the long term, we will be free together or not at all.

I want anarchists to think more about the long term implications of our choices and struggles. It is easier to think about the shorter term ethics of our choices – the consequences that are easier to predict and anticipate. However, it is also important to

attempt to anticipate these consequences further into the future, on a scale that spans beyond our species and unfolds over decades and centuries. As humans we should negotiate how we relate to ourselves and other forms of life based on consequences that are far beyond our lived experience as individuals. I think that anarchist ideas have important insights to contribute to this long-term ethical evaluation.

In this text, I start by describing how I see our existence in terms of relationships as opposed to discrete individual units. I look sideways at the Rotinohseshá:ka (Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois) and the Quakers and how their struggles for freedom in parallel to anarchists can provide some insights into what it looks like to make our relationships more free in a context of interdependence. I then consider the history of life on earth, and the place of our interdependence in the longer emergence of complexity in the universe. In the context of this longer narrative, I use the concept of capacity to explain how anarchists can relate to power while still rejecting domination. I then explore the concept of domination further using the example of plants and pharmaceuticals to argue that freedom involves a diversity of capacities, and we must be vigilant against differences in capacity being a context for the reproduction of relations of domination. Finally, I focus on the concept of freedom itself. I argue that it is made possible by our capacities to make choices about our relationships, but that more capacity does not mean our relations are more free. Specifically, although relations of domination can be a source of great capacity, domination cannot be a basis for relations of freedom. I conclude by returning to the future and

discussing some of the implications that this perspective has for the choices we make as anarchists.

My emphasis on relationality and interdependence, as part a vision for the future where all forms of life are more free, is influenced by my peripheral participation in Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), and Mi'kmaq sovereignty struggles. I relate to these struggles from the social position of a white settler with the politics of an anti-colonial anarchist. My politics are anti-colonial because I push for a struggle against relations of colonial domination which are backed by powerful state and capitalist forces. I understand the presence of these forces of domination on this continent to be the driving forces of colonization and genocide of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. The possibility of sharing this anti-colonial perspective with Kanien'kehá:ka and Mi'kmaq sovereignty struggles has been an important basis for connecting with them. Through these experiences I have learned of their worldviews that emphasize the importance of relationality and interdependence. As anarchists I believe that there is much that we have to learn from anti-colonial struggles that have centuries of history on this continent, and many shared bases on which to fight for similar kinds of futures.

The Reality of Interdependence

The story that humans primarily and fundamentally exist as individuals is pretty central to the European philosophical traditions coming out of the enlightenment, such as liberalism and anarchism, which emerged in conjunction with capitalism a few hundred years ago. This story takes certain aspects of our existence

that do partially operate on an individual level—our direct sensory perception and neural cognition—and positions them as the only criteria for defining how we exist as humans. I agree that our individuality is a part of how we exist. I also think that it is important to highlight how, as humans, we are also defined by social and ecological interdependence with each other and the rest of life on the planet.

I grew up and for the most part continue to live within a Euro-settler cultural context in which individuality is a fundamental assumption, a part of reality that we know implicitly and take for granted. It is difficult to think outside of this framework because it defines our social and cultural context in profound ways. One of my intentions with this text is to try describing our world, and how we should relate to it, in ways that break with this assumption of the individual. This assumption supposes that the fundamental unit of our existence is as individuals, and that outside of this we have relationships through our external interactions with other fundamentally distinct units. Instead, I want to blur the conceptual lines that define the limits of our individual existence. This allows us to think about our relationships as being foundational threads that weave together a web of our existence both as individuals, and in all the ways we exist beyond our individuality. This means that our relationships are not just external interactions, they are also inside of us, composing how we exist in the world. This shared-existence-through-relationships is a core part of what I mean when I talk about interdependence.

Interdependence defines how we exist as humans, and with life more broadly. All of the things that we want and need—from food and shelter to communication

and love—happen through relationships that make us who we are. It is also very important to recognize these relations are not always positive. All of the things that anarchists seek to destroy, such as patriarchy, capitalism, and states, are also forms of interdependence. Yet, our struggles for freedom must be understood in this context. We can be free within interdependence, and *not* despite it. Freedom *from* interdependence is embedded in the false notion of the discrete individual, and the capitalist lie that we can live beyond our ecological and emotional bases of support. Both of these lies are tied to systems of domination such as white supremacy and patriarchy, which are all about spreading the ideological kernel of human domination; the idea that some humans are worth more than others. The current world system attempts, in certain partial ways, to make these lies appear to be true, and in the process attempts to destroy and distort so much of what life is and could become.

Even though relations of domination have such a significant role in how human interdependence is currently organized, there are also significant ways in which we still have relations of freedom. What could it look like for interdependence to be heavily based on freedom rather than on domination? Trying to imagine these possible futures is an important task for anarchists who want to make those possibilities real. In this process, it can be very valuable to look at parallel traditions of struggle that are not anarchist, but have important history in relation to our context. Learning from these other traditions can give us insights that help improve our own thinking and practice.

With this in mind I will briefly discuss the understanding of interdependence that is expressed through the Rotinohseshá:ka

greeting, the Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen, which translates into english as “the words before all else”. It is also known in english as the Thanksgiving Address. The language of the Kanien’kehá:ka is Kanien’kéha, and I will try to use it for words that I know come specifically from Rotinohseshá:ka culture. I do not speak Kanien’kéha, but when possible I think it is important to refer to these concepts in one of the original languages from which they emerged. I will also look to the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, for whom the theological concept of “the inward light” has been an important basis for their participation in struggles for freedom, such as for the abolition of chattel slavery beginning as early as the 1680s. Although I will look at these other traditions as separate from anarchism, it is also important to recognize that there are individuals within the Rotinohseshá:ka and the Society of Friends who are also themselves anarchists and these affiliations, ideas, and identities are not inherently mutually exclusive.

Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen

The Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen is a description of the different forms of life on earth and how they relate to one another and should be appreciated, and is often recited at the opening of meetings or events. I had heard it recited many times, in english and in Kanien’kéha, before realizing the significance it has for the Rotinohseshá:ka worldview and the importance of the interdependence of life. My comprehension was helped by reading versions that have been written down in english. I recognize that it would be much more convenient for the reader if I could quote an english version of

the address here, but I am not going to do that for two reasons. First, as it is the literally called “the words before all else,” if I were going to quote it, I would have done so at the beginning of this article, or this zine. Second, without knowing very well the cultural context of the Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen, I am uncertain if and how it would be appropriate for me to quote it this way.

I leave it to the reader to find one of the many english versions that are available on the internet, which I provide links for below.¹ I encourage readers in this language to reflect on the subtle and important ways in which the meaning of the words changes in both translation across languages and cultural contexts, as well as the change from a dynamic oral recitation to a static written document. It is important to prioritize oral versions of the address, spoken in the languages of the six nations of the Rotinonhseshá:ka confederacy. For those of us who do not speak these languages, there is a video of language teacher doing visually-supported recitation of the address in Kanien’kéha, with a textual explanation of how some of the words can be translated into english.²

For the purposes of discussing the Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen in this text, I will quote a secondary analysis that has been done of the political significance of the address in terms of how it relates to the complexity and interdependence

of life. Specifically, Carol Cornelius, an Oneida/Mahican scholar, summarizes the Thanksgiving Address in the following way.

The world view expressed in the Thanksgiving Address recognizes the complex interdependence and interrelationship to the earth, nature, and human beings. It specifies the duties assigned to each of the elements of the natural world and duties of human beings regarding each of those elements. It expresses an attitude of appreciation and responsibility in an interconnected whole. Equality is expressed in the interdependence of all that was created. There is no separation between human beings and the natural world; all are equal and interrelated by kinship terms.³

Although this analysis of the address does not mention freedom explicitly, the equality that it is describing seems to me to be very related to the relational freedom that I referenced earlier. Ethical equality between all forms of life (including between humans) is an ideological foundation for relations of freedom because it contradicts an ideological foundation for relations of domination: that some forms of life are inherently more valuable and should benefit at the expense of others. This equality, in a context of interdependence, means that our relationships come with responsibilities to those we relate to (and that those relationships and those responsibilities therefore make us who we are). However, equality does not mean that those responsibilities are the same for all of us. We all have different responsibilities depending on our capacities, our relationship context, and our social and ecological positions. I want anarchist ethics to be able to help guide us in figuring

1 “Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen,” Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, 2015, 1-2, http://www.akwesasne.ca/wp-content/uploads/mcareports/MCA-Annual-Report-2013-2014_2014-2015.pdf

2 Karonhyawake Jeff Doreen, *Thanksgiving Address, Mohawk language*, video, 2:22, May 30 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YynklNrHUFE>

3 Carol Cornelius, *Iroquois Corn in a Culture-Based Curriculum* (Ithaca, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 79.

out how to relate to one another in ways that live up to our central responsibility to make our relationships more free.

In thinking about this question in the ecological terms of how humans relate to other forms of life, the Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen can be an important reference point. This is especially the case for those of us living in the parts of Turtle Island where the Rotinonhseshá:ka confederacy has been active as a non-state international political organization informed by this interdependence-based worldview for more than 850 years.⁴ It is important for those of us coming out of European cultural traditions to not romanticize the traditions of the Rotinonhseshá:ka and other Indigenous peoples. Like any other people, they have their own internal divides and conflicts over important ethical and political questions, which they continue to navigate into the future. While not romanticizing, it is also important to acknowledge the ways in which Rotinonhseshá:ka society has been much more egalitarian and horizontally organized than the European societies that carried out genocidal colonization over the past five hundred years. I believe that there are important shared bases for struggle to be found between the general beliefs and ethical foundations of anarchists and those of the Rotinonhseshá:ka confederacy.

Inward Light

It was while researching the early history of anarchists in relation to

4 Bruce E. Johansen, "Dating the Iroquois Confederacy," *Akwesasne Notes News Series* vol 4, #3 &4 (1995): 62-63. Accessed May, 2018. https://ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/DatingIC.html

slavery in the transatlantic context that I encountered the long history of Quaker involvement in slavery abolition and other struggles against domination. I don't have much personal experience of struggle with Quakers, so most of what I am saying about them is based on historical research. As a dissident Christian movement arising out of the rebellious period of the mid-1600s English civil war, Quakers are arguably an ideological older cousin with anarchists. They share some roots and commonalities with the earliest anarchist ideas as articulated by radical English intellectuals like William Godwin during the French revolution more than a century later.⁵

Since early in their history, Quakers have opposed domination in ways that have aligned them with important struggles for freedom. For example, in 1688 Dutch-German Quakers who had recently settled in the English colony of Pennsylvania wrote an internal petition making an ethical argument against slavery and presented it to their local Quaker meeting. This was the first written record of non-slave opposition to slavery on Turtle Island, and it was the beginning of Quaker support for slavery abolition that continued to grow for the next hundred years. By the time of the American independence war, Quakers had internally banned the owning of slaves, and were publicly advocating for abolition and supporting liberated slaves.⁶ Many Quakers were also very involved in illegally

5 Wikipedia contributors, "Enquiry Concerning Political Justice," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enquiry_Concerning_Political_Justice (accessed April 2018).

6 Wikipedia contributors, "1688 Germantown Quaker Petition Against Slavery," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1688_Germantown_Quaker_Petition_Against_Slavery (accessed April 2018).

hiding and transporting people as part of the underground railroad.⁷

What is it that made Quakers different from most other christians who accepted and defended slavery? Central to the Quaker version of christianity is the concept of the inward light, which argues that the truth of god can shine on to every person and influences their conscience to reveal what is right and wrong. This inward source of ethical truth is related to the Quaker rejection of priests as a source of religious authority, as well as the belief that the light is everywhere, including among people who are not christian.⁸ This fundamental ethical equality of all people is consistent with leadership of women in the early Society of Friends, against the very patriarchal norms in the rest of christianity.⁹

It is not difficult to imagine how the ethical equality that seems to accompany their belief in the inward light of all people would lead Quakers to oppose slavery and other forms of domination more quickly and consistently than other christians. The friends are more similar to anarchists than most other christians, but there are still obviously major philosophical and practical differences. One of the major practical ones is that most Quakers are committed pacifists. However, even as

pacifists, the Quakers who wrote the 1688 petition that I mentioned earlier argue that violent uprising of slaves against their owners would be justified, and they challenge slave owners to ask themselves if Black slaves have “as much right to fight for their freedom, as you have to keep them as slaves?”¹⁰ Similarly, for the two years prior to their attempt to spark an insurrection against slavery through their armed raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859, John Brown and his fellow insurgents lived and trained on land owned by Quakers in Springdale, Iowa.¹¹ Despite their pacifism, at least some Quakers recognized, and possibly supported, the role of violence in the struggle for the abolition of slavery.

As I’m sure John Brown and many abolitionist Quakers would agree, the most important part of the struggle against slavery came from Black people fighting for their own self-emancipation. This struggle has continued to deeply define life in this part of the world. Much more recently, anarchists in the United States have articulated a revolutionary abolitionist politics that seeks to continue the struggle against the systems of domination that have continued in different forms since the formal abolition of chattel slavery after the US civil war.¹²

7 Wikipedia contributors, “Quakers in the Abolition Movement,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quakers_in_the_abolition_movement (accessed April 2018).

8 Wikipedia contributors, “Inward Light,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inward_light (accessed April 2018).

9 Wikipedia contributors, “Quaker views on women,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quaker_views_on_women (accessed April 2018).

10 Francis Daniel Pastorius, “Quaker Protest Against Slavery in the New World” (Germantown, PA, 1688), page 2. Accessed April, 2018. http://triptych.brynmaur.edu/cdm/ref/collection/HC_QuakSlav/id/10

11 Wikipedia contributors, “John Brown (abolitionist),” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Brown_\(abolitionist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Brown_(abolitionist)) (accessed April 2018).

12 Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement, *Burn Down the American Plantation: Call for a Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement* (United States, 2017), <https://kuwasibalagoon.org/assets/bdap.pdf>.

Both the Quaker theology of the inward light, and the Rotinohseshá:ka worldview of equality and kinship of all life as expressed in the Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen, share a common ethical basis for equality and interdependence. For Quakers this extends to all humans, and for the Rotinohseshá:ka it also extends further to other forms of life. In both cases, this ethical equality is a basis for opposing domination in our relationships, and struggling for freedom. For me these are important reference points, both philosophically and in histories of struggle, for anarchists to ground an understanding of how we want to change our relationships so that more freedom is possible.

Capacities of Life

In order to understand how we can be free, and to understand how to fight domination, we need to clearly understand the ways in which life has different capacities in the world. By capacity I mean all the different ways in which we can affect each other and the world around us. This is intentionally a very broad and generic concept that covers all of the specific activities that are carried out by life. This includes things as old as finding food and protecting ourselves, and as new as global supply chains to produce electronics. As I will argue below, capacity is also not a concept that should have an inherent value judgment attached to it. It includes our most beautiful capacities to love and empathize with one another, as well as our terrible capacity to devastate large parts of our world using nuclear weapons.

Despite all of their differences, a commonality shared by all of these forms of capacity is that they are made possible

by knowledge we learn about the world around us. The most basic way that all life does this is through the information stored in genetic material about how an organism will relate to its environment, which is passed on through reproduction. Amongst animals there is also cultural knowledge, which is learned from lived experience and can then be socially passed on to other animals. This transmission of cultural knowledge seems to be most significant for mammals with large brains and complex social organization, specifically primates and cetaceans (whale, dolphins and porpoises), but it also seems to be present to more limited degrees in other animals such as smaller mammals, birds, fish and even insects.¹³

Humans have become capable of acquiring and transmitting cultural knowledge to an extent that far surpasses any other species on the planet. This has been made possible through complex language and oral traditions, and it has been accelerated by writing and very recently by computerized storage and processing of information. These knowledge techniques have made it possible for our species to learn about our world, and therefore use our capacities to affect it, in ways that far exceed those of any other life on the planet.

Our capacity to interact with the rest of the universe is not even limited to this planet. We have been able to observe in detail, and minimally interact from a distance, with other places in our solar system. We are able to extensively observe and study from a very large distance some things that are happening elsewhere in our

¹³ Wikipedia contributors, "Animal Culture," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_culture (accessed April 2018).

galaxy and the rest of the universe. Most of these capacities have been very recently acquired by humans over the course of the past few hundred years. On earth, our capacities to impact our world have been especially apparent in the past many decades of human history during which such large quantities of fuel have been burned that we're dramatically shifting average global temperatures. During the same period, our ecological impact is also resulting in a mass extinction of species on a scale that has only happened a handful of times since life began on the planet.

However, these biosphere-wide impacts by humans are not unique to the past few hundred years. Humans have had significant ecological impacts on most of the planet over longer time scales as well. For example, over the past fifty thousand years, human activity (likely hunting) on various continents and islands seems to have been one of the primary factors in the extinction of many larger species of animals (megafauna).¹⁴ The main difference between historical and present human ecological impacts is that the global extinction of most megafauna took many thousands of years, and now we are having even larger impacts over the very quick span of centuries. Humans in our current biological form have existed on the planet for approximately the past two hundred thousand years. Based on this timeline, it is clear there is an acceleration happening in our capacity as a species, and that it is primarily based on culture rather than genetics.

Going even further back in the history of life, humans are not the only form of life

that has had planet-wide impacts. Around two and half billion years ago, cyanobacteria became the first life on earth to produce oxygen through photosynthesis (another example of an important capacity of life), resulting in a dramatic increase in the oxygen levels in the atmosphere and the first mass extinction event of all of the bacterial life that could not survive in an oxygen rich environment.¹⁵ This is an example of how other forms of life have also had the capacity to change our planet in very significant ways, but those changes took place over time scales of many hundreds of millions of years.

There has clearly been a trend of life increasing its capacity to change our context, and also it seems as though that trend has been accelerating. Life, and humans as a part of it, are gaining more capacities more quickly as time goes on; capacities both on this planet and, increasingly, off of it as well.

Complexity in the Universe

Ongoing processes of genetic and cultural learning create more complexity of life, which then increases our capacity to affect the world. This increase in the complexity and capacities of life can be understood as a continuation of a broader trend of increasing complexity in the universe that precedes the emergence of life as we know it, stretching back many billions of years. Organic (carbon-based) molecules have been becoming more complex a lot longer than life has existed on this planet. Complex organic molecules, the building blocks for life, existed

¹⁴ Wikipedia contributors, "Megafauna," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megafauna> (accessed April 2018).

¹⁵ Wikipedia contributors, "Great Oxygenation Event," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Oxygenation_Event (accessed April, 2018).

prior to the formation of the earth, and are found in large quantities throughout the solar system and elsewhere in the galaxy. It is possible that the early stages of life on Earth began prior to the formation of the planet, and possibly even prior to the formation of the solar system five billion years ago. The galaxy seems to have been around for more than ten billion years, which means that the materials that came together to form the solar system we currently inhabit would have been the remains of solar systems that existed for billions of years prior to our own.¹⁶

This understanding of the ongoing, environmentally-based, learning process that results in ever increasing complexity and capacity of different forms of life is inspired by a specific approach within genetics which attempts to measure the functional genetic complexity of different species. Functional genetic complexity refers to the amount of the total genetic material of a species that encodes the functions of each organism and, therefore give it capacity in relation to its context. The measuring of functional genetic complexity provides a way of evaluating more precisely the differences in genetic complexity between different species for the purpose of estimating the rate at which this complexity is increasing over time as more complex species emerge from evolutionary change. The authors of this genetic analysis argue that there is an accelerating increase in the complexity in the universe that has been going on for at least 10 billion years, and that it seems likely that the emergence of life occurred prior to the

formation of the Earth.¹⁷

Most of the history of life and the universe that I have described so far is a narrative based on simplified fragments of various scientific theories in cosmology, biology, and genetics. With this narrative as a point of departure, it is relevant to more speculatively consider the ethics of possible relationships within a much larger and older interstellar ecology, of which life on earth is only one part. If our capacities as humans continue to increase in a way that continues the ongoing expansion of our knowledge of the universe beyond the Earth, the likelihood of us encountering life elsewhere increases. If this encounter does happen, it will be a first step towards having a more direct understanding of our place in the interstellar ecology of our solar system and beyond. The responsibilities that go along with those relationships will shift from being hypothetical speculation to very real political questions that we should then take as seriously as we currently should be taking our relationships with life on this planet.

I am curious about what this increase in complexity and capacity will look like as it unfolds into the future: for humans, for earth, for life and whatever else is out there. I believe it is a process that may temporarily slow down, or change forms, but I do not think that it will not stop. It has become increasingly clear in recent decades that humans have enough capacity to destroy ourselves and a lot of other life on the planet. Even in this worst case scenario, it seems certain that complex animal life will continue on earth and likely in other

16 Wikipedia contributors, "List of Interstellar and Circumstellar Molecules," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_interstellar_and_circumstellar_molecules (accessed April 2018)

17 Alexei A. Sharov and Richard Gordon "Life Before Earth," *eprint arXiv:1304.3381* (March 2013). <https://arxiv.org/abs/1304.3381>

places as well.¹⁸ Based on the examples of increasing capacity of life that we can see from billions of years ago up until recent decades, it seems likely that, whatever forms life takes, it will continue to become more complex, learn more information about the world, and thus have more capacities to affect it.

Returning to the equality that is expressed in the Ojibwe Karihwatehkwen, I do not think that the increasing complexity, knowledge, and capacities of life that I have described above have inherent ethical value. Humans are no more valuable than other forms of life simply because we have more complexity and knowledge of the world around us, nor is there any inherent ethical obligation for us to seek out more knowledge or capacities. This is important to emphasize because it is common in the euro-settler context that I inhabit to consider capacity to be inherently good. This is the logic of a hierarchy of life in which humans are the top because we are the most important, most valuable form of life, and everything else is below us and, therefore, naturally available for us to dominate. I would counter this narrative with one in which human capacity, just as all of the capacities of life that have come before us, are outcomes of a longer process of increasing complexity and capacity in the universe. This increasing complexity is occurring independent of any choices about it by humans or other life forms and is therefore not directly a basis for making ethical evaluations. However, our choices about what we do with this capacity once it

is available to us does have very important ethical implications, and this is what I want to discuss further.

Risks of Domination

Whereas life's tendency towards complexity and increased capacity is inevitable, domination is not. This is a key starting point for any anarchist discussion of domination, because a greater capacity does not inevitably translate to domination over other life. The notion that domination is necessary for increased capacity to be possible is part of a colonial-capitalist and patriarchal logic that sees our relationships as a means to an end: that the only way to have capacity in the world is to extract, exploit, and profit from others. This is obviously not true. This false colonial-capitalist and patriarchal logic is mirrored in some ways by a primitivist (and sometimes anti-civilization) critique of human capacities, which argues that our increases in capacity (whether it is through electricity, or agriculture, or language) necessarily result in relations of domination. I want our struggles to embrace a diversity of capacities, and reject all forms of domination. This means that it is a grave mistake to conflate capacity and domination with one another.

As I have described above, life continues to become more complex. In the process, new capacities emerge alongside ones that had existed previously. These differences in capacity do not necessarily translate to relations of domination. This is an important component to anarchist struggles against domination: figuring out how to live in ways that do not result in domination even though differences in capacity exist. Central to this challenge is

18 Giorgia Guglielmi, "This is what it would take to kill all life on Earth," *Science* (July 2017). <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/07/what-it-would-take-kill-all-life-earth>

that anarchists must clarify for ourselves the difference between capacity and domination. Our language around this discussion in english is often confused by the word “power” which is used to refer to both concepts, sometimes with the modifiers power-to when referring to capacity and power-over when referring to domination. Another variation on the language around this discussion has been the anarchist sticker slogan “we love power and hate authority.” I prefer the terms “capacity” and “domination,” but nonetheless, wanted to connect to these other terms in order to provide reference points for how I’m using these words.

I want to use the example of plants, medicine, and pharmaceuticals to demonstrate some of the ways in which capacity and domination are very different but still relate to one another, how a diversity of capacities is important, and how it is especially important to fight domination in the context of relations across differences in capacity. This is an important example because the medicines that many of us need are a very clear and unavoidable relation of interdependence. In some cases, pharmaceuticals are literally keeping us alive and are primarily available through state and capitalist production and distribution channels. In discussions that are seriously considering how to end states and capitalism, the question of pharmaceutical supplies can understandably often become very conflicted and emotional. As anarchists who are seriously considering revolutionary change, it is important for us to carefully think through these kinds of questions.

I am using the term capacity to refer to a very broad range of things, from the ecological transformations enacted by different forms of life on earth over

billions of years, to the different ways in which humans make medicines for ourselves. This rejection of domination between different forms of capacity also applies to struggles against the relations of domination inherent in ableism. This connection is especially important to highlight in a francophone context in which ableism usually translates into french as *capacitisme*. Differences in mental and physical ability are also differences in capacity, and therefore can be, and often are, a context in which relations of domination are particularly intense. As with all other differences in capacity, this does not need to be the case. Differences in ability should be a basis for ways of life that are interdependent with us all through relations of freedom and self-determination. This is yet another way in which we must break from dominating norms that attempt to enforce certain ways of life at the expense of others.

The cultivation of plants is a very different way of relating to medicine than the production of pharmaceutical drugs. As both the cultivation of plants and the production of pharma drugs are based on our knowledge of the world, this example illustrates different forms of capacity. For the use of medicinal plants, this knowledge comes out of long relationships to specific ecologies and has been a capacity of humans for at least tens of thousands of years. For pharmaceuticals, it is based on a detailed understanding of biochemistry which seems to have only emerged in the past two hundred years. In general, pharmaceuticals are able to have more intense and controlled impacts (for better and worse) on our bodies and our relationships than plants, and in this way they give us more capacity.

Plant medicine and pharmaceuticals

are both valuable capacities for humans, and should co-exist, just as different ways of life and worldviews that are often associated with these differences in capacity should also co-exist. Just because pharmaceuticals can have more potent or specific health impacts doesn't mean that they can or should replace plant medicine. On the other hand, the emergence of human capacity to make pharmaceuticals in the context of industrial capitalism (and other relations of domination) does not mean that the production or use of pharmaceuticals inherently requires relations of domination. I want us to fight for a world in which these different ways of life, traditions of knowledge, and forms of complexity can thrive on their own terms, and our relationships can benefit by the very different things that different human cultures and other forms of life all have to offer.

Pharmaceutical companies also use Indigenous and other traditional medicinal knowledge to identify chemical compounds in plants as part of the research and development of drugs.¹⁹ In theory, there are ethical ways that this kind of research collaboration for pharmaceutical development could be carried out. The differences in capacity between humans who have biochemical knowledge for producing pharmaceuticals and humans who have ecological knowledge and relationships with medicinal plants do not inherently lead to domination between these humans. If such a collaboration were to happen freely, it would be an example of how relations between different humans

with different forms of capacity can be beneficial. Unfortunately, this is definitely not what is happening. The same very powerful (both in terms of capacity and domination) state-capitalist-patriarchal system that backs and benefits from the pharmaceutical industry is also behind attacks on the land, culture, and survival of Indigenous peoples around the planet, often in order to carry out industrial extraction projects. This is domination in its clearest form: greater capacity being used to destroy other forms of life while simultaneously extracting from them.

Those who would seek to reform the systems of domination lament the loss of biodiversity that could have been so beneficial for pharmaceutical research and argue for conservation efforts. As anarchists, we should know that the underlying problem goes deeper than this, to the relations of domination that structure the parts of society that are destroying that biodiversity in the first place. It is often a colonial myth that there are "pristine" or "wild" parts of the biosphere that should be conserved. The areas that are given these labels have often been inhabited and heavily influenced by the presence of Indigenous people for thousands of years. One part of a rejection of all domination, including colonization, would be to recognize and support the freedom of Indigenous peoples to live their ways of life on these lands, and for them to make their own future based on their culture, capacities, and worldviews. This is freedom we all should have. In contexts defined by the intense relations of domination of genocidal colonization, it is an especially important freedom for Indigenous peoples.

With knowledge of the world that humans learn, and the greater capacities

19 Daniel S. Fabricant and Norman R. Farnsworth, "The Value of Plants Used in Traditional Medicine for Drug Discovery," *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 109, sup. 1 (March 2001). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1240543/pdf/ehp109s-000069.pdf>

that this makes possible, we should always focus on the responsibilities that go along with that capacity. Specifically, we must be vigilant that we do not use that capacity to enact relations of domination across new differences of capacity that have been opened up. As the nightmares of the past centuries clearly demonstrate, initiating relations of domination is frequently an option available to us and one that we must always strive to reject.

The horizon of freedom that we must keep trying to move towards is one in which there are a multitude of forms of capacity that exist and flourish in very different ways, and despite the vast differences in capacity between these ways of life, domination is not the basis for how we relate.

Possibilities for Freedom

As we exist through our relationships, freedom is our ability to change those relationships and, therefore, to change ourselves. Freedom becomes possible when we are able to understand our context (which includes ourselves and our relationships), reflect on it, and change ourselves based on those reflections. Depending on how we are able to understand our context (that is, depending on our capacities) different kinds of freedom become possible for us. As discussed above, through the flexibility and self-reflection of cultural knowledge, humans have capacities to make more choices about how we relate to our context than other animals. Similarly, most animals are able to make more choices about how they relate to their context than other forms of life such as plants. As our capacities give us more scope for choosing how we will relate to the world, there become more ways in which

we can be free in those relationships.

Just as certain kinds of capacity are a precondition for the possibility of freedom, the same is also true of domination. If an organism or a species is just going to react to the world around it and has no capacity to change what that reaction will look like, then it is not meaningful to ethically evaluate those actions in terms of how they produce relationships of freedom or domination. For example, the first mass extinction on Earth killed off large numbers of oxygen intolerant species and was caused by millions of years of oxygen-producing photosynthesis by cyanobacteria. Obviously cyanobacteria have no alternative to photosynthesis or ability to make choices about it. It is the only way that they exist and survive, and have no possibility of doing anything else, so the consequences of that behaviour cannot be meaningfully evaluated in ethical terms.

On the other hand, humans have a wide range of capacities that allow us to understand and change our behaviour (that is, to change our culture and our forms of social organization), and the consequences that we have on those around us. For this reason, it is definitely relevant to ethically evaluate the human contributions to unusually high levels of species extinction in recent centuries.²⁰ We have an ethical responsibility as humans to try to change how we are relating to the rest of life on the planet so that we are not continuing to kill off other forms of life. These extinctions are only one very clear part of what is a much larger context of human relations of domination with other life on the planet, which is also very related to domination

20 Wikipedia contributors, "Holocene Extinction," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocene_extinction (accessed April 2018).

between humans as well.²¹ For example, the destruction of entire ecosystems by capitalist industrial developments, over-exploitation, and planet-wide human impacts such as increasing carbon-dioxide levels, is also part of colonial domination of Indigenous peoples that depend on those ecosystems for their physical and cultural survival.

Freedom and domination both depend on us having capacities to be able to make choices about our behaviour as opposed to just reacting to our context. However, having the capacity to reflect and make choices does not mean that we are doing it. We are not free by default, we enact our freedom through the process of continuing to learn about our context, our relations and ourselves and then reflecting on this knowledge to make choices about how we want to behave. It is possible to go through our lives, and through our history as a species, reacting to the world as it exists around us without actively trying to change it in significant ways. This is often how we live, and in the long term it has had and will continue to have negative consequences for us all because it allows our relations of domination to continue reinforcing and reproducing through our lives. For example, in my context (and much of the world) the gender roles and relations that organize our lives and identities are heavily based in long histories of patriarchy through which cis-men like myself have power over everyone else. To understand and change these relationships through feminist and other anti-patriarchal

struggle is an important example of freedom in action and requires not acting based on how our world of domination is pushing us to act.

To recap what I mean by domination, it is the kind of relationships in which control of some by others is used to extract capacity. It also involves competition for obtaining positions of dominance and to avoid being dominated. These kinds of relationships don't happen by accident, or because certain people are inherently evil. It is a way of relating that coerces others into relating in the same way. And there are clear benefits to domination: the capacities of another form of life can be very lucrative when redirected and controlled to a particular end. This can take many forms and go by various names—extraction, exploitation, commodification, oppression, enslavement, theft (whether or not these particular activities enact domination depends on the context of power and ethics in which they are taking place). Whatever it is called, it usually has substantial benefits for those who are carrying it out. These benefits can definitely be a basis for more capacity for those in a position of domination.

A current example of this is the US empire using its geopolitical domination of large parts of the globe to advance its political-economic interests, and spending billions of dollars on research and development of military capacity in an attempt to maintain this position of superiority. We must reject domination on an ethical basis despite its narrow benefits, because it will hurt other people and forms of life that we have relations with and therefore responsibilities towards. To the extent that we exist in relation to those other forms of life, from a broader and longer-term perspective domination is ultimately going

21 I think that it is important to consider how an anarchist perspective on interdependent freedom would relate to the genetics of other forms of life, especially in relation to domestication of life by humans, but I'm not going to attempt to explore those questions here.

to be harmful even if it does provide shorter-term benefits. Furthermore, although greater capacities for some (at the expense of others) can result from relations of domination, an increase in capacity is not the same as being more free, and becoming more free is unlikely to be possible in a context where the majority of our relations are relations of domination, especially in the longer-term.

It is important to recognize the ways in which we are made less free by relations of domination even when we are benefiting from them. The US military is arguably one of the greatest concentrations of capacity on the planet at this time. It is also a major force for relations of domination on a global scale, and therefore despite all of that capacity it is not going to result in relations of freedom. Not for the soldiers and bureaucrats who are within the military, nor for the citizens of the empire who receive indirect economic benefits from its deployments of organized violence. Certainly, there are no relations of freedom being enacted for the hundreds of millions of people who have been targets of that violence.

Some may argue that the actions of the US military could make the ruling class beneficiaries of US empire more rich and powerful, and therefore able to change themselves however they like. However, we should not forget this is the same military that has come very close in the past to destroying large parts of the planet in a global nuclear war and could do the same again in the future. This deadly confluence of domination and capacity is a direct threat to the well-being of even the most privileged on the planet. Furthermore, this class of capitalist elites and other higher-level decision-makers are heavily involved in competition and other patterns

of domination with one another, and winning or losing at these games is very far from relationships of freedom.

In some cases, opportunities for enhanced capacities must be rejected in the interest of freedom. For example, the Zapatista rebels of southern Mexico are very strict about not accepting or participating in any state social programs because they recognize how these are used for political control and assimilation. This means foregoing access to state controlled healthcare, education, and other basic necessities, which is a very difficult choice for people who are poor and oppressed. Over the decades of their rebellion, they have instead opted to slowly build their own autonomous services and capacities that can centre their own Indigenous languages and worldviews and put into practice their revolutionary commitments against the domination of their communities by colonization, capitalism, patriarchy, and as they call it, the “bad government.”²² As with everything else, this has not been done in isolation. It has been made possible in part by through relations of solidarity and interdependence they have built with others struggling for freedom around the world, including many anarchists.

To bring a pertinent example from science fiction into this discussion, in the novel *Lilith's Brood* by Octavia Butler, the Oankali are an extraterrestrial species that are naturally capable of perception and manipulation of genetic material. Based on their genetic perception of humans, they describe us as having two contradictory characteristics: first, an old and deep

22 It is worth noting that the Zapatistas are not anarchists, and they have their own autonomous “good government.” I still think there is a lot anarchists can learn from their struggle.

tendency towards hierarchical behaviour and domination that is ultimately self-destructive. And second, they see a powerful intelligence that has emerged more recently in humans and can make many good things possible, but too often ends up at the service of domination. The Oankali conclude that unless we can change ourselves so that our intelligence no longer gets used for hierarchical purposes, then we will inevitably destroy ourselves.

Their description of our intelligence corresponds in many ways to what I mean by capacity. Similarly, their conclusion that we must change ourselves so that our capacities are not used for domination is also very similar to the anarchist politics and worldview I am trying to articulate. However, there is one significant difference in what I am saying: I strongly believe that human relations of domination are not inevitable due to genetic or any other deterministic factor. In other words, I believe that humans have the capacities to change ourselves, especially socially and culturally, in ways that make it possible for us to reject domination. We have a capacity for freedom, and this is at the core of what we are trying to do as anarchists, to act on this freedom so that our relations can be transformed to be more free. Even with thousands of years of domination behind us, that does not determine our future. We must use our amazing capacities and intelligences to fight for our relations to be free and to live up to the responsibilities that we have to each other and the rest of life. This freedom will allow so many different worlds and capacities to flourish in the ruins of domination.

To Conclude

What I am saying here doesn't change in dramatic ways the things that anarchists are already fighting for, but I do want it to contribute to a shift in how we think and talk about those ongoing struggles. We should be seeing our existence more in terms of our relationships and thinking about the responsibilities that go along with these. I want us to be open to learning from other traditions of struggle that may be different from our own in important ways but still share a common basis for shared goals. I want us to keep at the forefront of our ideas the basic ethical equality of all humans as well as other forms of life, while also recognizing that we have different responsibilities within these different kinds of relationships. Looking at where we come from as life on earth has implications for where we are going, and how we might relate to life on and off of this planet. I want us to embrace all of our very different kinds of capacity, while being very clear with ourselves about the differences between the capacities that make us who we are, and the relations of domination that we must always reject. Finally, I want us to live up to our full potential for freedom as humans. We have the capacity to change how we relate to each other and the world, to end the domination that has been such a harmful part of life for far too long. That is the future we must move towards, and we have important choices to make about how to get there. ♦

